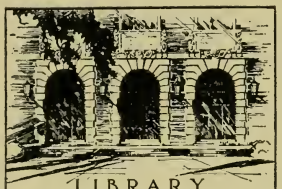

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MISS SHAFTO.

BY

W. E. NORRIS,

AUTHOR OF

"MAJOR AND MINOR," "MY FRIEND JIM," "THE ROGUE," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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MISS SHAFTO.

CHAPTER I.

NORMA SEES TWO OF HER FRIENDS.

CHARITY proverbially begins at home; and it may be said of Miss Shafto, whose whole life was given up to charity of one kind or another, that she paid due attention to that axiom. The charity which is generally necessary for home use consists, one may almost venture to affirm, chiefly in looking pleasant. This ought not to be a very difficult feat; but it cannot be easy, or the failure of most of us to accomplish it would not be so conspicuous. When we are constrained to do what is altogether repugnant

to our tastes (and are not so much as thanked for doing it), we are perhaps entitled to assume an injured or a sulky air; yet if, by heroic effort, we can manage to refrain from such an exhibition of feeling, it is not improbable that we shall eventually reap our reward in some indirect fashion. Norma Shafto hated Folkestone; but she had not by word or look insinuated to her father that she was dissatisfied with the bare, windy watering-place to which he had transported his household gods for the summer. Thus, if she obtained no other reward for her forbearance, she had at least that of sparing him vexation; for he declared that he was always contented when she was, and without any doubt he believed himself to be telling the truth in so declaring.

But as for being really contented in a place like Folkestone, away from all her friends and occupations, that was not possible. There was, to be sure, a Convalescent Home, at which she had been

asked to visit certain London patients, and thither she betook herself daily ; but, with the exception of this not very arduous duty, she had no work to do, and the amusements affected by the few friends whom she had in the place had the fatal drawback of not amusing her.

Mr. Shafto, on the other hand, liked Folkestone very well. He could always get a rubber of whist at the club, he was continually coming across people whom he knew amongst the promenaders at the band, and he fancied that the air suited him better than that of Stourshire. Moreover, he was a good deal away. What was the precise nature of the business which took him up to London two or three times a week he did not state ; but Norma was given to understand in general terms that he was occupied with highly lucrative money transactions in the City, where he was wont to meet his friend Baron Lämmergeier, whose fine place in Hertfordshire was within easy reach of the capital.

One evening he announced with satisfaction that he had persuaded that valued counsellor to run down to Folkestone on a couple of days' visit, and to bring Mrs. Lämmergeier with him.

"It's rather an honour, you know," he explained. "At least, it's a favour. Lämmergeier says he likes nothing better than filling his own house; but he's so busy that he has to make it a rule never to stay with people. It seems, however, that his wife has taken a great fancy to you; so they are going to break through their practice for once."

Accordingly the Lämmergeiers arrived, with a valet, a maid, two pugs and an enormous quantity of luggage.

"I'm sorry about the dogs," Mrs. Lämmergeier took an early opportunity of saying to Norma; "but they always accompany us when we pay visits. Hermann insists upon it. He has heard that certain Royalties always take their dogs about with them; and as everybody

particularly dislikes this habit, it gives us a sort of prestige, you see, to follow the Royal example."

"I like dogs for their own sake," answered Norma; "they won't be any inconvenience to me. And I suppose they don't often inconvenience others; for I hear from papa that you refuse all invitations to stay with your friends."

"Did Hermann tell him that? If so, Hermann was guilty of a slight exaggeration. What he must have meant to say was that we indignantly refuse to stay with those who have neither money nor a title. I need hardly point out to you that we, who have nothing common about us, cannot consent to appear common."

Mrs. Lämmergeier remained in this somewhat disconcertingly sarcastic mood throughout the evening; but on the following day, after her husband had sauntered down to the harbour with Mr. Shafto to see the Boulogne boat come in, she asked Norma to come out for a walk with her,

and began to talk about schemes for promoting the welfare of the working classes with something more like the humility which she had displayed in an earlier stage of their acquaintanceship.

"It isn't that I have the smallest faith in your Utopia," she remarked, after a time; "but you are so delightfully reasonable and practical about it that it's a pleasure to listen to you; and I've no doubt you do some good, though I never should." Then, with an abrupt change of subject, she asked, "Have you any influence over your father?"

"In some ways I think I have," Norma replied.

"Then get him to drop business relations with Hermann, if you can. There's a nice thing for a woman to say about her husband! But I'm not saying anything against him, mind you; and in fact I don't know anything. Only I have observed that the small people—I mean the people of comparatively small fortune—who are

mixed up in his speculations generally come to grief. Hermann himself comes to grief from time to time; but then Hermann has enormous capital, or enormous credit, or something, and it doesn't seem to hurt him much. The others sink. Don't ask me any questions, please. I can't tell you more than that, and perhaps I wouldn't if I could. But I felt as if it would make me rather more comfortable to tell you that much."

Now this warning, to which no subsequent allusion was made, caused Norma a good deal of uneasiness. She had a strong suspicion that Mrs. Lämmergeier had come to Folkestone for no other purpose than to deliver it, and she thought it over long and anxiously after that lady's departure. Yet she knew her father well enough to know that no effort on her part to shake the confidence which he reposed in Baron Lämmergeier would be at all likely to meet with success; and indeed the tentative remonstrances which she essayed both surprised and angered him.

"My dear child," said he, "you really must allow me to be the best judge of how I am to conduct my own affairs. I don't interfere with you in housekeeping matters, about which I admit that you know a great deal more than I do. Of course I know what it is: some silly woman has been telling you that Lämmergeier is an adventurer. Well, I think he can afford to disregard such calumnies; but it so happens that if he were the biggest thief in Europe it would make no difference to me. I have asked his advice and profited by it, and more than once he has very generously gone out of his way to tide me over a difficulty; but individually he does not hold a sixpence of my money."

"But is there any necessity to speculate at all?" Norma ventured to ask. "Can't we live upon what we have?"

"There is every necessity," returned her father irritably; "and as for living upon what we have, I can tell you that if I hadn't had the good luck to let Brampton,

I should be most unpleasantly pinched at the present moment." Then he laughed and stroked her hair, and added, "You're a wise woman, my dear, and you disapprove of risk, as all wise women should; but then, you see, you don't know quite everything. After all, if I want to become a little richer, it's more for your sake than my own."

There was not much consolation to be got out of that; but Norma made good her title to be considered a wise woman by holding her peace, and Mr. Shafto's visits to London continued to be frequent.

It was at this time that a letter from Madge Wilton reached her friend which had the effect of temporarily making the latter forget Baron Lämmergeier and the pitfalls of the Stock Exchange. Madge, who wrote from Scotland, had a great many trivial questions to ask, and a great many unimportant things to say. It was not until she had read five pages of note-paper that Norma came to the following announcement:—

"Now, my dear old Norma, I am going to tell you something that will rejoice your heart or make your hair stand on end; and the funny thing is that I really don't know which it will do, because you are not a bit like other people. I am going to be married to Sir Christopher Shearman. He asked me in what, for him, was quite a pretty way—very meek and conscious of his unworthiness, and so forth; and I told him plainly that I hadn't the courage to refuse so rich a man. He thought this a capital joke—what it is to have such a sense of humour!—and repeated it afterwards in the drawing-room before everybody, to mamma's deep discomfiture. What has put such a notion into his head I can't imagine; but I believe he actually thinks I am devoted to him! Meanwhile, he is as respectful as could be wished and takes no liberties, finding that I don't like them. The wedding is to be *very* soon—before the end of next month, I think—and I want you to be my chief bridesmaid and

see me through the trying ceremony. There is an appearance of unseemly haste about this; but Sir Christopher says he doesn't see any object in delay, and mamma, who is mortally afraid of a slip between the cup and the lip, is all for despatch. So before the winter, I suppose, I shall be reigning at Brampton in your place! It seems very odd, and not very nice; but perhaps you would rather that we were there than strangers.

"The other day, as I was walking alone on the hill, I unexpectedly fell in with Lord Walter Sinclair. He is staying with his brother, who has a shooting-lodge near this; but we are not likely to meet again, as Constance says she doesn't care to know Lord Loddondale, and I dare say he isn't consumed with anxiety to know her. I don't think I like him very much, after all—Lord Walter, I mean. Very few people improve as one gets better acquainted with them, and he isn't one of the very few."

All this Norma read with surprise and distress. She had at one time thought that Madge might do worse than accept Sir Christopher, but had changed her mind about that on discovering that the girl's heart had been bestowed elsewhere. And being, as she still was, convinced that Madge loved Lord Walter, she was very much afraid that what had happened was the result of some foolish quarrel.

"I have had a letter from Madge Wilton, announcing her engagement to Sir Christopher Shearman," she said, shortly afterwards, to her father, who responded heartily—

"And a very good thing too! I'm delighted to hear it, and not astonished. I had my suspicions, you know. Shearman is a good fellow, and will make a good husband, I'm sure."

"Yes," agreed Norma rather doubtfully. "He is a great deal older than Madge, though."

"So much the better. Our little friend

Madge is inclined to be flighty, and Shearman will steady her. Shearman is thoroughly steady."

Norma could only hope so; but she had seen Sir Christopher a trifle unsteady on his legs after dinner, while of the instability of his temper she had had more than one proof. Her hope was that Lord Walter would keep his promise of writing to her, and that she would soon receive from him some account of the shipwreck his hopes had suffered. However, the post brought her no letter in his handwriting; and one afternoon she was debating whether it would be very unwise to send a few lines to his London address, when Lord Walter himself was announced.

"You didn't expect me to turn up here, did you?" said he, as he held out his hand to her.

"No, indeed," she answered; "I thought you were in Scotland. But I am very glad to see you."

"Thanks! I can honestly return the

compliment. As I am going to cross the Channel to-morrow, I thought I might as well stop a night at Folkestone upon the chance of having a talk with you. I intended to write, as you were kind enough to tell me that I might; but talking is easier than writing—especially when one has bad news to announce. I have been to Scotland for the purpose that you know of, and I have disastrously failed. Perhaps you have heard that already?"

"Yes," answered Norma; "I had a letter from Madge a few days ago, in which she told me that she had accepted Sir Christopher Shearman. I didn't quite understand it."

"Oh, there isn't much to understand. She has accepted Shearman, and she is going to marry him; that's all."

"But I don't understand why she is doing this. Can't you tell me?"

"I'm afraid I can. She is doing it because she thinks that love is all very well and very pretty in its way, but that

it isn't substantial; whereas horses and carriages and frocks and jewels are. As far as I am able to judge, she has given the whole question very careful and dispassionate consideration."

"But perhaps you are not very well able to judge," observed Norma. "Whatever she may be, you can scarcely be dispassionate in this case; and I shouldn't admire you for it if you were."

"Well, let us say that I am not dispassionate; it really doesn't much signify. She would marry me if I had Sir Christopher's income; but as I haven't, she won't. That was what she told me, and I have no reason to doubt that her sincerity was equal to her candour. You think I am sore? Yes; I am sore, and I don't deny it. To discover that one has been made a perfect fool of is always mortifying. At the same time, it has perhaps the salutary effect of cauterizing one's wounds."

Poor Lord Walter's wounds were evidently far from having been cauterized

as yet. Norma said, "I don't know what may have taken place in Scotland : but I am convinced that Madge had no thought of making a fool of you when she was in London. If you have quarrelled with her, and if she has taken Sir Christopher in a fit of pique, I think you ought to go back, while there is still time, and make friends with her again. It would be a thousand times better to eat humble pie than to let her ruin her whole future life—and yours."

Lord Walter laughed. "I don't think you have quite taken that young lady's measure yet, Miss Shafto," said he. "How should you? She is one of those people who are very difficult to classify, because they are so perfectly natural. Most of us are hampered by scruples and prejudices—the relics of what we have been taught in our childhood—or by feeble attempts to act up to some standard which we have fixed for ourselves; but she is free from anything of the kind. Her mother, I should imagine, insists upon her going to

church once a week, and of course she had her confirmed at the usual age, and she has since impressed upon her that it is rather wrong to flirt with poor men, and very wrong indeed to marry them. That would be about the extent of the system of morality which she has been taught. Consequently, she follows the dictates of Nature as far as she can, but pulls up when she finds herself opposed by the forces of civilization. If you asked her, I am sure she would tell you that she greatly regrets being obliged to marry Sir Christopher Shearman, but that it can't be helped, and that he will make handsome settlements. You need have no fear that her life will be ruined."

"You are very hard upon her."

"I don't think so. I believe I am telling the simple truth. You are mistaken in supposing that there was any quarrel between us. I will tell you exactly what occurred."

Accordingly he did so; and when he

had concluded his narrative, Norma was compelled to admit that the answer which had been given him must be regarded as final.

"Only," she pleaded, "I think there is just this to be said for poor Madge—that her mother is unsympathizing and persistent, and that she herself is not very brave."

"So she told me. I dare say it is true. There are excuses for everybody and everything. But you see I have been made a fool of, all the same; and whether that was my fault or hers doesn't seem to matter much."

"And where are you bound for now?" Norma asked presently.

"For Paris first of all. I used to know a great many of the Parisian artists, and they were a pleasant set of fellows. I shall look them up, and very likely spend the autumn among them at Fontainebleau or one of the places which they affect. Then, later on, I shall make for Rome, and set

up a studio there, and begin to work in earnest."

"Papa often talks of spending next winter in Rome," remarked Norma. "Perhaps we may meet you there."

"I hope so," said Lord Walter, brightening up a little; "that would be something to look forward to. You have been very kind to me, Miss Shafto; and I'm sure I don't know why, except that it is your way, I suppose, to be kind to everybody. When we meet in Rome, if we do meet there, you will find me quite cured, I hope."

Norma smiled, and seemed to assent; yet she could not help being a little sorry that in the midst of his mortification and disappointment he should already be looking forward to oblivion. Fidelity to a memory, which a man always feels to be a trifle ridiculous, seems natural and beautiful to women—by whom, in truth, it is sometimes actually achieved; and perhaps that was why Norma added—

"Do you know, I am a great deal more sorry for Madge than I am for you. I am afraid she hasn't chosen what will make her happy, and she will never be able to go back from her choice now."

Lord Walter shook his head slightly. He had said all that he intended to say in disparagement of the girl whom he had loved, and whom, in a certain sense, he still loved; as for pity or sympathy, he had not much of either at her service. So he changed the subject, and by-and-by took his leave; and that was the last that Norma saw or heard of him for several months.

CHAPTER II.

HAPPY SIR CHRISTOPHER.

It was in fine autumn weather that Norma and her father returned to their own county in order to be present at Madge's wedding, having been invited to spend a week with Mrs. Wilton for that purpose. Mrs. Wilton's small house would not hold many guests, and she herself thought that it would have been more proper and fitting to place her spare rooms at the disposal of the Huddersfields and the Lacys; but Madge pointed out that the Lacys, who certainly would not stay more than one night, could be accommodated, that Lord Huddersfield, who could not be made comfortable, would undoubtedly, if asked, display that sense of

what was due to himself which he always did display under such circumstances, by making everybody else as uncomfortable as possible, and finally, that Norma's help in carrying out arrangements for the coming festivities would be invaluable. So Mrs. Wilton being at this time very much pleased with her youngest daughter and unwilling to refuse her anything in reason, gracefully yielded, and extended to her former neighbours a welcome as warm as it was in her nature to bestow upon anybody.

A king when once he has abdicated should not return to his former dominions, nor a vicar who has accepted another living to his former parish, nor a squire who has let his place to the estate upon which he has ceased to reside. It is sad (however much one may have been prepared for it) to find that things have deteriorated during one's absence; it is not perhaps quite as satisfactory as it ought to be to find that they have improved; so

that, upon the whole, such reappearances can only be recommended to persons of large views and sweet temper. However, Norma's temper was perfect, and Mr. Shafto, to do him justice, was a man free from the pettier failings to which human nature is prone. Mr. Shafto, moreover, was just now in excellent spirits and even more than usually disposed to look upon the bright side of everything. He had made some lucky speculations; what was perhaps better still, he had escaped without loss from others which had frightened him terribly for a time, and he was now looking forward to a pleasant winter in the south. He did not seem to mind revisiting the scenes amidst which the greater part of his life had been passed, and from which necessity had severed him in his old age; he went about among his tenants, with whom he had always been popular; he dropped in to lunch with the neighbours, who were delighted to see him; he had a day's partridge shooting with Sir Chris-

topher Shearman at Brampton, and altogether enjoyed himself amazingly.

Norma could not rise to quite so high a philosophic level. The surrender of Brampton had been a far heavier trial to her than to her father; she loved every stick and stone about the place, and when she took her walks abroad there was not a thatched cottage nor an ivy-grown homestead but seemed to gaze at her reproachfully. Her poor people, too, sympathized with her, as the manner of their class is, by making the very worst that could be made of a bad business. They shook their heads and wept and said times were hard for all, but 'twas a terrible thing, sure enough, when them as had lived upon the land for centuries were driven out to make room for rich tradesmen and such like. Also they prophesied that the poor old squire would not survive long in exile, "though he do bear up wonderful." And as for themselves, what was to become of them, without Miss Norma to help them

through their troubles when the winter set in, the Lord alone He knew!

Nevertheless, it appeared upon further inquiry that these jeremiads were uttered rather as compliments than as a statement of actual grievances; for Sir Christopher had evidently been extremely liberal, and as soon as these good people discovered that the interloper might be spoken well of without offence, they all with one consent began to extol his generosity. Now, it was true that Norma had heard something about Sir Christopher's ambition to represent a constituency in which the voters were mainly agricultural, and she had also heard more than once that he was a man who did not spend money heedlessly; but whatever his motives might be, it was something to be thankful for that the poor would be taken care of under his sway, and she did not grudge him any praise that he might receive either in that quarter or elsewhere.

By Mrs. Wilton, as a matter of course,

he was praised in the highest terms; and as for Madge, she said very little about him, which was as much as could be hoped for. Madge was very busy, and, to all appearance, very happy. There had been a great piece of work to get her trousseau ready in time; but now all the frocks had arrived and were a source of unmixed delight to her. Sir Christopher rode over daily, but showed himself in no way exacting, and was, as she always said, "very kind."

When Norma and she were together there was plenty of matter for conversation as regarded the decoration of the church, the attire of the bridesmaids, the disposition of the guests at the wedding-breakfast, and so forth, and this was a relief to the former, who was rather in dread lest embarrassing questions should be put to her or indiscreet confidences reposed in her. It is quite probable that Madge was aware of this apprehension, and that she had sensibly made up her mind neither to say nor do

anything to justify it; but Madge often changed her mind, besides being at all times liable to be swayed by chance moods or emotions; and so it came to pass that on the eve of her wedding-day she suddenly asked what Norma had been expecting her to ask at any moment during the previous week.

"Have you seen or heard anything of Lord Walter Sinclair?" she inquired.

Norma could only reply in the affirmative. "He has gone abroad," she said; "he called on us as he passed through Folkestone."

"Ah, that must have been just after he left Scotland. Did he say anything about me?"

"He mentioned you, of course."

"Why, of course? But as he did mention me, I suppose he had nothing very pleasant to say about me."

"He told me that he had proposed to you and that you had refused him," Norma thought it best to answer candidly; "but I

am not going to repeat all that he said, and I don't see why you should be interested in hearing it."

"Not interested! My dear Norma, as if anybody wouldn't be interested in hearing what a man whom she had refused said about her afterwards! I believe even you yourself would be. Still, if you don't choose to tell me what he said, I can easily guess. He was very unjust and very selfish, I thought. He chose to take it for granted that I was doing what I am going to do simply for my own gratification; although he might have known—and, for the matter of that, I told him—— However, I don't care what he thinks."

"I hope you don't," said Norma gravely; "you certainly ought not to care."

Now, perhaps this was not the wisest speech in the world to make, and Norma showed something less than her usual judgment in making it. She wanted to check the avowal which she saw was impending; and, instead of laughing it

off, which might have been done successfully, she endeavoured to rouse the pride of one whose share of that quality happened to be infinitesimal. The consequence was that Madge at once melted into tears and reproaches.

"I did not think you would be so hard to me, Norma," she sobbed. "Everybody else is hard; I know what I have to expect from everybody else. But I thought *you* would understand."

So the old story was repeated once more. Her mother had urged and worried her; her sisters had preached at her; she knew that her life would have been made unendurable if she had not yielded to their wishes. It was all true enough, and Norma was aware that it was true. Madge would unquestionably have had to face a bad time if she had rejected Sir Christopher; but then she might have rejected him and faced the bad time, and she had not done so. It would be much kinder to rebuke her now than to sympathize with

her. Yet it was not very easy to help sympathizing with her. She seemed so innocent in her selfishness, so unconscious of having wronged anybody; and there was something in her utter loneliness, too, which was pathetic. And so it came about that before very long Norma found herself soothing and condoling with her friend, who was now crying hysterically, and who had allowed some broken ejaculations to escape between her sobs which would have been better left unuttered.

"Madge," Norma said at last, "this will never do. If you don't love Sir Christopher——"

Madge broke into a wild laugh. "Love him! Could anybody love Sir Christopher?"

"Perhaps; how can one tell? But if you don't—still more if you love somebody else—you have no right to marry him. It isn't too late yet——"

"Not too late?" interrupted Madge—and somehow or other the suggestion had

a wonderfully tonic effect upon her, so that she at once sat up and began to dry her eyes. "What! after the wedding-cake has been sent and the banns called and everything? Of course it is weeks and weeks too late! Now, Norma, you must forget all the nonsense that I have been talking. I was excited, and I wanted to have a cry, and I've had it, and I'm all right again. As for being in love with one's husband, why, you don't suppose that Edith was in love with that horrid old Huddersfield, or Constance with Dick Lacy, do you? and yet they wouldn't change places with any woman of their acquaintance; they have both told me so. And, Norma, there's another thing. You are not to imagine, please, that I am the least bit in love with Lord Walter Sinclair. I liked him very much as long as he was nice, and I didn't like him when he turned nasty—that's all. You are very welcome to tell him so from me, if he should ever ask you about it."

Norma could not quite believe this state-

ment. She had seen more in London than Madge was aware of, and indeed the girl's manner was hardly of a nature to carry conviction with it. Yet what could be done? It was evidently impossible to stop the marriage. There was nothing for it but to accept the inevitable and hope for the best. After all, it did not seem unduly sanguine to hope that Madge might be as happy as her sisters.

The wedding, which was solemnized on the following morning at Brampton Church, was in all respects the smartest that the county had seen for many a long day. The bride, whose dress was a triumph of millinery and whose splendid diamonds (the gift of the bridegroom) excited the envy of all feminine beholders, was a little pale, as all brides ought to be, but maintained her composure admirably, and said what she had to say in a clear, audible voice. The bridegroom was suffused with smiles and looked like a fool, as perhaps all bridegrooms are apt to do. As for the

bridesmaids, Mr. Basil Morley, who was present and who was an authority upon such points, declared that the basis of pale and dark blue out of which their charming costumes had been evolved was thoroughly artistic and that he did not remember ever to have seen Miss Shafto look more beautiful. "Although," he added, "Miss Shafto would look beautiful in sackcloth."

Lord Huddersfield thought the bridesmaids' frocks ugly, and said so; but Lord Huddersfield was a very cross old man, and he had had rather a long drive from Warbury Park, which house had been placed at his disposal by the absent Lord Loddondale, and he was not at all sure that he hadn't caught a cold in his head. Lady Huddersfield, a very handsome woman, well known in the fashionable world, was pleased to express approval of the proceedings generally, and said a few kind words to her sister; but she would not stay for the breakfast, explaining that they always had mutton chops and boiled potatoes for

luncheon, and that, since these delicacies were not forthcoming, she thought they had better get back to Warbury as quickly as possible.

Most people will agree with Lady Huddersfield in disliking wedding-breakfasts, and in these days the people who are married in London very generally contrive to dispense with them; but in the country this is less easily managed. Mrs. Wilton, therefore, had provided her friends and neighbours with a feast of the old-fashioned kind, which was duly graced by the presence of the bride and bridegroom. In the absence of any better-qualified person, Mr. Shafto proposed the health of the happy pair in felicitous terms; Sir Christopher responded jovially, and then Mr. Morley suddenly rose to his feet with some fell intent which he was precluded from carrying into execution, for, chance or design having placed him next to Miss Travers, he was at once gripped and forced back into his seat by that stalwart lady, who

told him that if he didn't shut up, she would wring his neck. Then the bride withdrew to change her dress and take a fond farewell of her mother, half an hour after which she reappeared, exquisitely arrayed in fawn-colour, trimmed with silver fox, and stepped lightly into the brougham which was waiting for her. There were no tears and not many embracings or last words.

"Which is quite as it should be," observed Mr. Shafto, rubbing his hands. "I never could see why people should want to turn a wedding into a funeral."

As the carriage drove away, Norma stood on the steps, gazing after it a little wistfully. By her way of thinking, there are many weddings which are far sadder than funerals. After death comes at least rest, one may hope. It is as impossible to doubt this in the case of our own dead as it is to help foreseeing the possibility of misfortune for such of our friends as are still living, and although some loveless

marriages turn out, or seem to turn out, satisfactorily, one can scarcely suppose that the generality do. Therefore Norma looked pensively after the retreating brougham until her meditations were interrupted by the voice of the sententious Morley, who said—

"Don't you know, Miss Shafto, that it is very unlucky to watch people out of sight?"

"Well," answered Norma, wheeling round abruptly, "they are not out of sight yet, so I trust I shall have brought no misfortune upon them."

"That," remarked Mr. Morley, "is likely enough to overtake them, I should say, without help from anybody. I myself, as I need hardly tell you, am no believer in superstitions of any kind, but I occasionally venture to make predictions which are grounded upon something more solid. Upon observation of human character and conduct, in short."

"Really?" said Norma. "But perhaps

you are sometimes mistaken; and if you have any disagreeable prediction to make about Madge, I would rather you didn't make it to me."

"Then I will not say what I was going to say," returned the poet imperturbably. "Miss Wilton never interested me particularly; Lady Shearman, I confess, does."

And doubtless he would have explained why Lady Shearman was so favoured, had he not at this juncture been interrupted by a rude person who made it a practice to interrupt him as often as she could.

"Now, Mr. Morley," said Nell Travers, bustling out of the house, "suppose you make yourself useful for once. Just run to the stables and see whether my dog-cart is ready, will you? And if it is, you can drive it round for me. Don't let the mare bolt with you, though."

Mr. Morley looked as if he did not half like the commission. "Perhaps one of the servants——" he began.

"My good man, I can't get them to

attend to me; so it isn't likely that you'll get them to attend to you. Don't waste time, please; I want to be off."

"You will make the poor fellow break his neck," said Norma reproachfully, as Mr. Morley retired with reluctant steps.

"No fear! In the first place, nothing would induce him to drive the mare, and in the second, nothing would induce me to let him attempt it. He'll find my groom in the stable-yard all right. Don't you be anxious and troubled about your friends, Norma. They can take precious good care of themselves, you'll find, and they know very well what they're about."

"Do you think so?" asked Norma, smiling.

"I'm as sure of it as I am that Sir Christopher has got a pretty wife, that Madge has got an adoring husband, that Mrs. Wilton has secured another rich son-in-law, and that everybody is satisfied all round."

And Miss Travers's dog-cart dashing up

to the door at this moment, she climbed into it, waved a farewell to Norma, and drove off at a smart trot.

Mr. Morley, who had returned, composedly picked up the thread of his discourse where he had dropped it. "Lady Shearman," said he, "becomes interesting from to-day. Hitherto she has been under the influence of her mother, and it has been easy to guess how she would act under any given circumstances; henceforth she will be under the nominal control of a man whom she neither loves nor fears as yet, and what she will develope into is quite uncertain. I shall watch her career with curiosity."

"I see Mrs. Morley making signs to you," said Norma, not caring to prolong the conversation.

Basil Morley was pompous and silly enough; yet she could not help feeling that his comments upon the situation were more to the point than those of the good-humoured Nell Travers.

CHAPTER III.

LORD LODDONDALE MAKES A SUGGESTION.

NOWADAYS it is not usual for any girl to grow up to womanhood without having once quitted her native shores; and if young people are still as light-hearted and as easily amused as they always were (which seems probable, notwithstanding some loud assertions to the contrary), yet it cannot be denied that the delightful sensation of living under conditions of absolute novelty must, before they have been twenty years in the world, be no longer possible to the majority of them. But Norma's lot had been an exceptional one. Her father, always an optimist, had been perfectly satisfied with his daily avocations and diversions at Brampton

until the fall in the value of land began to make him restless, nor had he ever cared to leave home, except on an occasional visit to a friend or for a run up to London. Consequently, when this pair set off in the late autumn on their way towards Italy, Norma enjoyed thoroughly every step of the journey ; and, for the matter of that, Mr. Shafto enjoyed it as much as she did. They did not hurry themselves, having no occasion to do so, but actually halted at Boulogne and Amiens on their way to Paris, in which latter city they spent ten days of unmixed pleasure, seeing all the sights, prowling round the brilliantly lighted Palais Royal after nightfall, dining at the various restaurants of which a list had been handed to Mr. Shafto by the knowing Lämmergeier, and visiting such of the theatres as had been pronounced by that authority to be *convenables*. Mr. Shafto was very particular in his inquiries upon that point, and it may be hoped that Baron Lämmergeier made a scrupulous selection ;

but perhaps it wouldn't have mattered very much if he had not, for, to tell the truth, neither Norma nor her father were first-rate French scholars.

It was a joyous time, and Norma often looked back upon it afterwards with a pain at her heart. She and her father had always been the best of friends; but latterly they had not seen a great deal of one another, and he had often been worried and absent-minded, seeming as if he had troubles which he would like to talk about (for it was his nature to talk about his troubles), yet resenting any leading questions that might be put to him. Now, however, all these cares had evidently been left behind in England, and Mr. Shafto's chief thought was how he might best please his daughter. To be sure, that was not a difficult matter, and there was no need for him to buy jewellery for her in the Rue de la Paix in order to accomplish his end; still the jewellery was pretty, and it pleased him to see her wearing it, and it

pleased him even more to find that her tastes and wishes coincided in all things with his own.

"It's wonderful how well we get on together, Norma!" he exclaimed one evening, beaming at her across the little table at which they were dining. "An old fellow like me and a young girl like you—nobody would believe it. 'Crabbed age and youth,' you know. But, after all, why should age be crabbed? I don't know why that should be taken for granted."

No doubt he gave himself the larger share of credit for the happy state of things to which he alluded; but if he did, it was not by Norma that he was in any danger of being contradicted.

"Certainly you are not crabbed," she answered; "but then I never think of you as being old, somehow. In many ways you seem to me to be younger than I am."

Mr. Shafto laughed, not ill-pleased by the compliment; but he pretended to be vexed. "Younger than you indeed!

What impudence! I suppose you mean that I am more foolish and more easily taken in. Now, I know very well that is what you think, Norma; but if you will just wait a little bit and judge by results, you may perhaps alter your opinion."

Well, it was an opportunity; but she had not the heart to take advantage of it. Mrs. Lämmergeier might talk of her influence over her father; but would any father stand being told by his daughter that he was too rash in money matters? Besides, she hoped that, for the present at any rate, he was giving himself a holiday.

From Paris the travellers proceeded slowly southwards by way of Dijon, Avignon, Marseilles, Cannes, and Nice, pausing at all these places and making friends everywhere. Mr. Shafto never denied himself the amusement of entering into conversation with his fellow-wanderers. He did not know what a dangerous practice this is (for how can you tell whether somebody to whom you have addressed a few

civil words at a *table d'hôte* may not turn up afterwards in London and claim acquaintance with you and give no end of trouble?). Or perhaps he did know it and didn't care; because there never lived a less calculating man.

So in the natural course of things, Monte Carlo was reached one fine December evening; and, being in such a place, it was of course desirable to take a cursory glance at those discreditable scenes which have so often been described in the newspapers. "Not that I believe all the stories one hears about suicides and other tragedies," Mr. Shafto said, as he entered the Casino with his daughter. "Very much exaggerated, no doubt, and perhaps inventions of interested persons, as I was assured at Nice."

At any rate, there was nothing very tragic in the aspect of the assemblage in the gaming-rooms. It was a large assemblage, and it consisted for the most part of people who were playing either

regularly or intermittently; but none of them appeared to be in a mood for self-destruction, nor did any very large sums of money seem to be changing hands.

"I suppose," observed Mr. Shafto, after a time, "one ought just to be able to say that one has staked a trifle."

Accordingly he fumbled in his waistcoat-pocket, produced a coin, and laid it down upon *Impair*, whence it was presently swept away by the rake of the croupier. Not quite liking this, he repeated the stake, and was awaiting the result of his second venture with some interest, when Norma was accosted by a rather loudly dressed gentleman with reddish hair and sharp little eyes.

"Miss Shafto!" he exclaimed. "Fancy your being here!"

"How do you do, Lord Loddondale? Ought I not to be here?" asked Norma, laughing.

"Well, I won't go so far as to say that. Everybody comes here, of course. Only it

isn't exactly the sort of place where one would have expected to see *you*."

"But I assure you I am only a spectator, and I am going away presently, and I disapprove of gambling quite as much as you can."

"Oh, I don't disapprove of gambling; and if I did, I dare say I should gamble all the same, because I'm an awful profligate, as every old woman in London will tell you. It isn't that—it's the company. I mean, if I had sisters of my own, I shouldn't care to have them mixing in a crowd like this," explained Lord Loddondale, who, like many men of his type, had very strict notions as to what ladies ought and ought not to do.

And now Mr. Shafto, having won sixty francs, turned round and became aware that his daughter was engaged in conversation with a sporting-looking stranger; whereupon Lord Loddondale reminded the old gentleman that they had met before, and expressed his great satisfaction at this

opportunity of renewing acquaintance with a valued friend of his father's. For some reason or other, this young magnate of the turf, whose bad manners were notorious, seemed anxious upon the present occasion to make himself very agreeable. He accompanied Mr. and Miss Shafto as far as their hotel; he chatted pleasantly as he walked beside them in the bright moonlight; he asked whether he might be allowed to call, and expressed a hope that they would not hurry away from Monte Carlo, "which is really out and out the most charming place on the Riviera. Beats everything else hollow in point of climate; and there's always plenty of first-rate music too for those who like it. I dare say Miss Shafto likes music."

Miss Shafto admitted that she did. "But Lord Loddondale was telling me just now that he doesn't at all approve of my being here," she remarked.

"Oh, that was in the gambling-rooms. I beg your pardon; I didn't mean to be

impertinent; but it's true that I think ladies are better out of that place. They can amuse themselves very well at Monte Carlo without going near it."

"I'm quite of your opinion," agreed Mr. Shafto heartily; "one shouldn't countenance that kind of thing. The propensity for gambling is one of the strongest passions in human nature, and of course it's a bad passion, and it ought not to be fostered. I am altogether opposed to legalized gambling; though I know there are arguments which may be brought forward in favour of it."

Lord Loddondale did not know enough about Mr. Shafto to be amused by this declaration of principle; but Mr. Shafto knew enough about Lord Loddondale to be much gratified by the latter's civility.

"Now doesn't that show," he exclaimed to Norma, when they had taken leave of their escort, "how careful one ought to be about judging one's neighbours by hearsay! I have heard the worst possible reports of

that young man; yet I'm bound to say that a more pleasant and gentlemanlike fellow I never met. He isn't as good-looking as his brother; but he seems to me to be much more simple and straightforward."

A good many persons connected with the turf would have said that straightforwardness was not Lord Loddondale's most conspicuous quality, and it is a fact that he considered himself fully entitled to mystify those whom he suspected of trying to get the better of him; but in the ordinary relations of life he was plain and outspoken enough, as Norma discovered no later than on the ensuing morning.

She woke early, with the warm sunshine streaming through her open window, and having got up and dressed herself, went out for a walk before breakfast. She wandered slowly along the terraces and through the well-kept gardens, drinking in the balmy air and marvelling at the exquisite, soft hues of sea and shore. The

Riviera has been terribly disfigured no doubt, but the climate and the colouring and the outline of the hills remain unalterable. Besides, Norma was not in a position to draw comparisons, not having seen that lovely region in the pre-railway era. She seated herself upon a bench and gazed at it all, and was satisfied, experiencing that sensation of pleasure in the mere fact of being alive which is scarcely attainable in more northern latitudes. And being in so happy a mood, she was not annoyed when Lord Loddondale, clad in an aggressive check suit, suddenly interposed his person between her and the prospect, but was only very much surprised to see him out of doors at that hour.

"Are you always such an early riser?" she asked him, after returning his salutation.

"Well, yes," he answered; "I am as a rule. I don't care about lying in bed after I'm awake, and there's a good deal in habit, you see. What with cub-hunting

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and duck-shooting and one thing and another, I've got into the way of doing with less sleep than most men."

A short pause followed; after which Norma said, "Isn't it a divine morning?"

Lord Loddondale had seated himself upon the low wall facing her and was swinging one of his legs. "Awfully jolly," he responded rather absently; and then, "Shall you stay here long, do you suppose?"

"Oh no; we are going on to San Remo this afternoon."

"Really? I'm very sorry we are to lose you so soon; but, as you're going, I'm glad I chanced to meet you this morning, because there are one or two things that I rather want to say to you. You're bound for Rome, your father told me."

"Yes, eventually. Is there any chance of your coming on so far?"

Lord Loddondale shook his head. "Not likely. I shan't begin hunting till after Christmas this season; but that don't give

me much time to spare, you see. However, you'll meet Walter there. I dare say you've heard that he has set up his stone-breaking shop at Rome for the winter. I don't see why a man should do better statues in Italy than in England; but perhaps, under the circumstances, it's just as well that he should have a little bit of a change, eh?"

Lord Loddondale looked keenly at Norma as he made this observation, and she laughed, which appeared to please him.

"Ah," said he, "I see you know all about it, and that's quite the right view to take of it. It's the view I take myself. It's a thing to be laughed at; it never was serious from the first."

"I think it was very serious to him," Norma said.

"Oh, he fancied so—naturally. One always does. But you know as well as I do, and a great deal better perhaps, that the girl had nothing except her beauty—and none too much of that. Walter isn't

the sort of man to live happily with a wife who has only looks; and so, in my opinion, he's deuced well—I mean uncommonly well out of it. I shouldn't wonder if that was his opinion too by this time."

All this was not a little surprising to Norma, who had not supposed that Lord Loddondale took so kindly an interest in his younger brother. She liked him all the better for it, though she scarcely knew what reply to make. "Lord Walter was staying with you when—when he had his disappointment, was he not?" she asked at length.

"Yes; he came for a couple of nights. Rather ridiculous, you know. Of course the other fellows who were shooting with me guessed what had happened, though I made up a yarn about his having been suddenly called away. But what I wanted to say to you, Miss Shafto, was that I hope you won't think the worse of poor Walter for having made an ass of himself in this way. It isn't so very extraordinary, you

know, that a man should be fascinated for a time by a little flirt; it's what we're all liable to. But as for his having been really in love with her—don't you believe it!"

"But I do believe it, and I don't think at all the worse of him for it," said Norma wonderingly. "Why should I?"

Lord Loddondale made an impatient movement. "Oh, well," he said, "perhaps I express myself badly; I'm not much accustomed to this sort of thing. I had better say straight out what I mean, and then if you're affronted it can't be helped. But I'm sure you won't take offence where none is intended. The long and the short of it is, Miss Shafto, that that little Wilton girl wasn't in any way suited to Walter, and that you are. Exactly suited to him, I should say. I won't swear that he's good enough for you; but he really is a good fellow, and always has been. Nobody can call him a muff—I don't know many better shots

than Walter—but he has never broken loose and played Old Harry all round, as I have. He's clever too, and good-looking. It does seem to me that you might do a great deal worse."

Norma burst out laughing. Lord Loddondale's suggestion was too comical to be disconcerting; and although he reddened and looked annoyed at her merriment, he admitted that his behaviour was unconventional.

"You'll say I might let him speak for himself. Well, he'll do that, I expect. Of course I may be mistaken; only I don't think I am. I've noticed certain little things in his manner when we were talking about you. But all I want to beg of you is that you won't refuse to listen to him just because you happen to know that he once had a fancy for somebody else. I wish you wouldn't laugh; it isn't a joke."

"I have no doubt you mean to be kind, Lord Loddondale," answered Norma; "and

I will try not to laugh any more, since you don't like it. But your anxiety to marry me to a man who has never shown any personal anxiety in that direction does seem rather queer and unaccountable."

"Not so very, if you will think of it. I'm not a marrying man, and though I may live to be seventy, it's more likely that I shall die comparatively young, because I'm not altogether sound. I had a bad fall out hunting two years ago, and I've never really got over it. It wouldn't take a great deal to kill me. Well, then, don't you understand that I should be glad to see Walter married, and that I should like him to marry the woman who, if you'll excuse my bluntness, strikes me as being the very best and most charming I have ever met in my life, not excepting my own mother?"

Norma looked at her companion, who presented every appearance of robust health. It was a little difficult to believe that anxiety for the perpetuation of his title

could have put this whimsical notion into his head. He spoke again before she had time to make any rejoinder.

"I know what you're thinking, and you're quite right; that isn't my only reason. Do you know, Miss Shafto, I'm not such a bear as people make me out. I should like very much to associate with ladies sometimes if I could; only I can't, because the moment that I attempt it they begin trying either to marry me themselves or to marry me to somebody else. Now, you're not one of that sort; and if you were my sister-in-law, perhaps you would sometimes let me come and talk to you—which would do me a lot of good."

"But, Lord Loddondale," said Norma, "you are most welcome to come and talk to me as often as you like, though I am not your sister-in-law."

"Thanks; it's awfully good of you to say that. But I'm afraid it wouldn't be quite the same thing, would it? And then

again, I should like to serve Walter a good turn. As I told you once before, I have done him out of his inheritance, and now he won't take anything from me; but if he were a married man, I think he would see that the case was altered. When I spoke to him about an allowance, I said a thousand a year; but I could easily make it a good deal more than that. Do think it over. Of course I don't expect you to promise that you'll take him if he asks you, or anything of that sort; only you might just bear in mind that he won't be a poor man. You might have Warbury rent free, and I should be only too pleased if you would keep the house aired for me; because I shall never live there myself. And as for that silly affair about Miss Wilton——"

But here Lord Loddondale's eloquence was cut short by the appearance of Mr. Shafto, who had come out in search of his daughter, and who was disposed to be a shade less amiable and talkative than on

the previous evening, not having yet had his breakfast.

Lord Loddondale was begged to join his friends at that repast, but excused himself upon the plea of a previous engagement, adding that, as he was going to shoot pigeons that afternoon, he was afraid he would not be able to see them off at the station. So presently he took his leave, with a parting glance at Norma which recalled the last injunction of Charles the First to Bishop Juxon.

CHAPTER IV.

MADGE'S HUSBAND.

It has been asserted by some that the entire devotion of any man, be he who he may, is never disagreeable to any woman. This is perhaps putting the case too strongly, but one may at least hope that when the woman has gone the length of marrying the man, she prefers adoration on his part to neglect. Madge, at all events during the early days of her married life, found it quite pleasant to be worshipped by Sir Christopher Shearman, and liked him a great deal better than she had ever imagined it possible that she could. It was an altogether new sensation to her to be anticipated in every wish and to be treated as though her comfort were the

only thing in the world worthy of consideration. She had one of those natures which are called affectionate (a term not necessarily implying any great readiness to make sacrifices for the sake of affection), she was fond of people who were kind to her, and it seemed quite possible that she might end by becoming fond of Sir Christopher.

The newly married couple went to the Lakes to spend the honeymoon, and got on wonderfully well while the fine weather lasted. They visited Windermere and Coniston and Ulleswater, and, the season being so far advanced, were not much plagued by tourists. They were neither of them people who cared very much for scenery; yet after their fashion they enjoyed the shifting lights and shades upon the hillsides and the brilliant autumn tints upon the trees, and every day Sir Christopher took his wife out in a boat and taught her how to use an oar, expressing the greatest surprise and admiration at her proficiency.

It was not very exciting; but somehow or other the hours were filled up, and Lady Shearman, writing at this time to her friend Miss Shafto, stated in so many words that she was "as happy as possible."

But at Keswick, alas! it began to rain; and then it was that the dreadful danger of wedding journeys and the wisdom of those who set their faces against them became apparent. Now, every one will allow that to be shut up in an English hotel, with nothing to do except to watch the drops running down the window panes and rap a falling barometer, is much worse for a man than it is for a woman. Women can write letters to their friends or busy themselves with fancy-work; but what is to become of a man who doesn't like reading and who has already exhausted the newspapers? Therefore it was clearly Madge's duty to try and cheer up her husband, instead of growing cross and petulant and declaring outright that she was bored to death.

Sir Christopher was not a good-tempered

man; moreover, unless he had some amount of exercise every day his liver got out of order; so, when her ladyship made this rather unkind speech, he swore loudly at the weather—a thing which he certainly ought not to have done in her presence, though the circumstances were enough to excuse a bishop for forgetting himself. Madge chose to take his behaviour in very ill part, and turned her back upon him; whereupon he flung out of the room, muttering in his beard, and did not show himself again for several hours.

It was only an absurd little tiff, such as might have occurred between any married couple, and it was speedily followed by a reconciliation, Sir Christopher begging pardon very humbly and calling himself a brute. Still it served as a warning that the present situation was fraught with peril; so, after dinner that evening, while her husband, somewhat comforted by a bottle of champagne, was smoking before the fire, Madge proposed a change of scene.

"I don't like this place," she said. "Don't you think we might make a move?"

"It's a beastly hole," agreed Sir Christopher gloomily; "but I don't know that one of the others mightn't be beastlier, and we can't go home yet, because the house isn't ready to receive us."

"But couldn't we try another part of the country? Harrogate, for instance, or Buxton. At least there would be a band there, and perhaps a club, where you might meet somebody whom you knew."

Sir Christopher jumped at the suggestion and rang the bell at once to give the necessary instructions. Not, he was careful to explain, that he cared a straw about a club or about meeting fellows whom he knew. His wife's company was all that he wanted.

"Well," returned Madge, laughing, "I am flattered by your saying so; but, at the risk of being thought rude, I must confess that in such weather as this I should like

nothing better than to come across an acquaintance."

And it so fell out that she obtained her wish; for when, on the succeeding day, they reached the hotel at Buxton, which place they had decided upon in preference to Harrogate, who should accost Madge but her cousin Mrs. Langley, who, it may be remembered, had once given Lord Walter a cup of tea and an opportunity. Mrs. Langley's presence at Buxton was accounted for by the circumstance that she had a gouty husband. He limped out presently and joined the group—a fat, good-humoured little man, who accepted his chronic ailment philosophically and managed to amuse himself in spite of it. With Sir Christopher he had already a slight acquaintance, and he was delighted to see his wife's pretty little cousin, having a strong predilection for pretty people.

"Buxton isn't half a bad place," he told her. "Do you want to be left to yourselves? Or shall we take you about and

try to make things as lively as we can for you?"

"Oh, we don't want to be left to ourselves," answered Madge, with a promptitude which made both Mr. and Mrs. Langley laugh.

The next day was fine, and the Langleys redeemed their promise. They knew everybody whom it was desirable to know among the visitors and patients; they introduced the new arrivals to these; some short expeditions were planned and carried out, and for a couple of days Lady Shearman had a very pleasant time of it. Then a curious thing came to pass. Sir Christopher had evidently not participated in his wife's enjoyment. He had been silent and sullen, and had even made one or two snappish little speeches to Mrs. Langley; but Madge had attached no importance to these symptoms, knowing that Sir Christopher was often rude to people whom he did not happen to fancy. On the third evening, however, when they had gone upstairs to

their sitting-room, after dining with the Langleys, he astonished her by breaking out, without any preface, into a torrent of reproaches.

"If this is the sort of thing that I'm to expect, I've a nice sort of life before me! Considering that we haven't been married a month yet, I should have thought you might have managed to tolerate my society for a part of the day at least; but it seems that anybody suits you better than your own husband. You are with these people morning, noon and night. I wonder it doesn't strike you that perhaps they may get tired of you, though apparently you can't get tired of them."

"Surely," exclaimed Madge, half laughing, half frightened (for in truth Sir Christopher looked very fierce), "you can't be jealous of poor fat little Mr. Langley!"

"Of course not; I never said anything about jealousy. I simply state a fact—which you can't deny."

Yet he really was jealous—not of Mr.

Langley more than of Mrs. Langley, but of any one, without regard to sex, who drew his wife's attention away from himself. Ridiculous as this was, a magnanimous woman might have pardoned it, recognizing it as being what it was in truth, evidence of a love which had completely overmastered such reason and self-control as the poor man possessed. But to Madge it was simply ridiculous. Sir Christopher made her understand what he meant, and she despised him for his folly. Some sharp words passed between them; after which he bounced out of the room, as he had done at Keswick, banging the door behind him.

Towards ten o'clock Mrs. Langley put in her head, and having received permission to enter, came and seated herself by the fireside.

"Madge, my dear," said she, "you have been quarrelling with your husband; and that is a very silly thing to do."

"How do you know?" asked Madge.

"Because he is drowning his sorrows in whisky and seltzer at the bar. Now what is it all about?"

Madge, when she had a grievance, was never disposed towards reticence. She told her cousin what had occurred, and was not very merciful in her comments upon Sir Christopher's conduct. "It is so idiotic and so unmanly," she said. "At one moment he positively almost *whimpered;* though he began by looking at me as if he meant to beat me."

Mrs. Langley shrugged her shoulders. "It is idiotic, no doubt," she agreed. "As for its being unmanly, I don't know so much about that. Men when they have nothing to do with themselves always become fractious and intractable. If you'll take my advice, you will propose to Sir Christopher to go straight home to-morrow. When he has had some shooting and cub-hunting to take the nonsense out of him he'll be right enough, and he won't want to be tied to your apron-string all day

either. But whatever you do, don't begin having domestic rows. That system very seldom pays, and in your case it would be certain to fail, because, saving your presence, you have no strength of character at all."

Mrs. Langley was a good-natured sort of woman and by no means such a fool as she was considered to be by some people. She gave her cousin a few more sage counsels, the upshot of which was that when Sir Christopher, already half ashamed and repentant, slunk in about midnight, he was met by a smiling little woman who placed a hand upon each of his shoulders and said, "Christopher, shall we be friends again? I'm tired of Buxton and I'm tired of the Langleys, and I think it would be very nice if we were to go home at once. Shall we?"

So the new tenants of Brampton Priory took possession of their abode; and for a few weeks all went smoothly and well. As Mrs. Langley had predicted, Sir Chris-

topher was reduced to a more amiable frame of mind by open-air sports, and Madge found plenty of occupation and amusement in arranging the furniture and receiving the visits of the neighbours. Brampton was a fine old Elizabethan mansion, with many spacious reception-rooms; and although of late years the gardens and conservatories had been shorn of much of their former glory by reason of the straitened circumstances of the owner, Sir Christopher had supplied what was lacking there with a liberal hand, besides having, with his landlord's permission, made considerable additions and improvements to the inner decoration of the house.

"You're very much smartened up," observed Miss Travers, who drove over in a high dog-cart to pay her respects to Madge shortly after the latter's installation, "but, to be frank with you, I don't much fancy these alterations. Our old friends couldn't afford to live here any longer, and as they had to find tenants, I suppose you

will do as well as anybody else; but you needn't keep reminding us at every turn that you are so much better off than they are. It hurts our feelings."

But not all Lady Shearman's visitors were so outspoken or so uncivil as this; nor perhaps was it the case that their feelings were hurt by the contrast between the present and the late denizens of Brampton. Riches have a definite value all the world over, and people who can afford to entertain largely must be regarded as an acquisition in any county. Amongst others who were so good as to express their satisfaction that Lady Shearman's marriage had not severed her from the neighbourhood in which her childhood had been spent was Mr. Basil Morley, who called one afternoon, bearing an apology from his mother.

"She is quite shut up at present with a bad cold," he said; "but I did not wish to wait for her recovery before offering my own humble welcome."

"Thanks; but I shouldn't have thought that any sentiment of yours could possibly be humble, Mr. Morley," answered Madge, who had been a good deal snubbed by the supercilious Basil in days gone by.

He hastened to explain that he was in reality a very modest man. Many people, he was aware, thought otherwise, and it was scarcely worth while to correct them; but, as a fact, no one was more conscious of fallibility than he. "I often make mistakes; doubtless we all do," he added, sighing. "It is lucky for us if our mistakes are not of an irremediable nature. I suppose your—Sir Christopher doesn't spend much of his time at home, does he?"

"My — Sir Christopher always comes home in time to dress for dinner," answered Madge demurely. "He doesn't come home to tea, because tea isn't in his line. It is in yours, I know, so I'll ring and order it."

"Thank you very much," said Mr.

Morley; and when the tea was brought he drank it as if he enjoyed it, doing full justice to the buttered toast which was provided for him at the same time. Also he continued his interrogations, the drift of which could not have been misinterpreted by the most obtuse of women. He was evidently curious to find out how the new *ménage* was getting on, and Madge amused herself by hinting that she had still some unsatisfied longings, thereby earning the sorrowful sympathy of her questioner.

He said, "There is nothing sadder in this sad world, Lady Shearman, than the acknowledgment which most of us have to make sooner or later, that our lives are a failure. We are only here for a very short time, and whether any future state of being is in store for us is a mere matter of conjecture; so that if we have to pass our present existence under conditions which are distasteful to us, we can't but doubt whether it would not have been better never to have been born at all."

"I haven't got quite so far as that yet," remarked Madge. "Have you?"

Mr. Morley passed his hand across his forehead and sighed again. He was rather fond of sighing. "I think," said he, "that I may possibly leave my mark upon the literature of the age. If I am destined to do so, I shall not have lived altogether in vain, and upon the chance of it, I am at least resigned to linger for a while upon the surface of this dull planet. You will agree that it is dull—at any rate, that the greater part of its inhabitants are."

"I don't know the greater part of them," answered Madge; "so I can't say."

"Quite so; but whether we speak of Stourshire or of Europe makes very little difference, I fear, so far as the proportion of intelligent to unintelligent beings is concerned. Look at our good neighbours in these parts—what are they? Mere cyphers, leading a purely animal existence. Miss Shafto was an exception."

"Norma," said Madge, "would be an

exception anywhere. She is worth all the rest of us put together."

Mr. Morley made a little bow, as if a compliment had been paid to himself. "I am glad," said he, "that you appreciate one of the noblest characters that I have ever studied. But Miss Shafto, unhappily, has left us, and you now occupy her place."

"I am sorry to be such an unworthy substitute," answered Madge; "but it can't be helped."

Then Mr. Morley assumed that winning smile which had exposed him more often than he had any idea of to the risk of being publicly assaulted. "My dear Lady Shearman," said he, "to draw comparisons between two persons so dissimilar, yet both so charming, would be absurd. What I meant to imply was that, since we have lost the one, we ought to be very thankful indeed to have gained the other."

Before Madge could make any reply, the door was thrown open, and in marched Sir

Christopher, clad in cords, leather gaiters, and shooting boots.

"How do you do?" said Mr. Morley, rising languidly to greet the new-comer.

"Oh—Mr. Crawley, isn't it? How are you?" returned Sir Christopher rather gruffly. And, having shaken hands, he planted himself upon the hearthrug, with his coat-tails gathered up under his arms.

"I suppose," pursued Mr. Morley presently, "that you have been indulging in the Englishman's usual recreation of slaughter."

"I've been rabbiting, if that's what you mean," answered Sir Christopher shortly. "Aren't we dining out somewhere to-night, Madge?"

Mr. Morley took the hint. He prided himself upon his readiness to take hints; and indeed, if these were made sufficiently broad, he sometimes detected them. He picked up his hat and stick and said he was afraid he must tear himself away; but

what convinced him that he had produced that favourable impression upon his hostess which he flattered himself that he usually did produce upon those whose society he sought was that Madge, in bidding him good-bye, added—

"You must look us up again, Mr. Morley. Won't you come and dine some evening? Thursday next, for instance?"

The truth was that the compliments and innuendoes of the poet had rather pleased her. He was, of course, an egregious goose; but he was entertaining in his way, and her husband was very apt to fall asleep after dinner.

No sooner had Mr. Morley graciously accepted this invitation and retired than Sir Christopher's wrath exploded. "What, in the name of all that's extraordinary, possessed you to ask that beast to dinner?"

"Is he a beast?" inquired Madge innocently.

"*Is* he a beast! Well, I suppose that's

a question that a woman might ask; but I'll be hanged if I believe there's a man in all the length and breadth of England who would."

"Poor Mr. Morley! What has he done?"

"Ah, that's just what I should like to know. What has he done? The fellow is so conceited he can hardly stand; and yet, so far as I can make out, he has never done anything since the day of his birth except eat and drink and disfigure the face of creation."

"I believe he has read a great deal," said Madge; "that is something."

Then, all of a sudden, Sir Christopher became really angry. "Oh, very well," he returned; "if you like him there's no more to be said; but I can't congratulate you upon your taste. As you have asked him to dine, he must come for this once, I suppose; but I won't have him here again —mind that. I know very well what brutes of that kind are after when they take to

dropping in at five o'clock. The amazing thing to me is that you can tolerate him. It makes me feel sick only to look at the fellow!"

And with that Sir Christopher stumped off to dress.

CHAPTER V.

MRS. WALTER.

From the outsider's point of view, there was something to be said for Sir Christopher Shearman. He was madly in love with his wife, and his absurd jealousy of any one, man or woman, whose company she showed the slightest sign of preferring to his own was, after all, only the exaggeration of a sentiment with which we all are, or ought to be, able to sympathize. Yet it must be admitted that to be married to a person of Sir Christopher's temperament would be a sort of purgatory; and this was what Madge very soon found it to be. That he should be jealous of Basil Morley was silly and annoying; but Basil Morley

might very well be dispensed with for the sake of a quiet life : the sacrifice would not be a heavy one. One cannot, however, cut one's self off from the society of all one's friends, including one's own mother ; and Sir Christopher, who had been uncommonly civil to Mrs. Wilton in the days of his courtship, now gave it to be understood in so many words that he did not want to have his mother-in-law "always poking about the place." He suspected, it seemed, that his wife hatched plots or made complaints of him when his back was turned. He was for ever suspecting something ; and although he was ready enough to apologize and make friends again when once he had reduced Madge to tears, that did not prevent him from behaving in exactly the same way on the following day. Such a system is about as wise as that adopted by certain schoolmasters of accusing boys of offences which cannot be proved against them. "If I am to be flogged in any case," thinks the boy, not unnaturally,

"I will at least have the satisfaction of deserving it."

Into this perilous condition of mind Madge was rapidly drifting; but, fortunately for her, her temptations were few.

For the rest, she was not exactly unhappy—riches and the material enjoyments which riches bring having still the charm of novelty for her. Only she was a good deal bored at times and puzzled how to fill up the long vacant hours. Norma, she remembered, had never been bored, but had, on the contrary, been always busy; but then Norma had been perpetually running about among the poor people. Well, she too would visit the poor. It was one of the duties belonging to her station, and she thought it might even be rather amusing to perform it. So she visited the poor, and was very well received by them. She interested herself in the clothing-club and the cottage hospital and so forth; also she dispensed her pocket-money freely (for Sir Christopher made her a noble allow-

ance), thereby earning showers of benedictions.

"In a few weeks," wrote the rector of the parish, who kept up a correspondence with Miss Shafto, "your friend Lady Shearman has done more mischief in the way of demoralizing our people than I could set right in a year, if it were in my power to drive her out of the country to-morrow."

Madge laughed when this worthy man remonstrated with her, and told him that she could not make herself as hard-hearted as he was. To care for heavy, brutish Hodge and his grumbling wife and his dirty children as Norma cared for them was impossible to her; but she liked very well to play the part of Lady Bountiful and to trip into cottage after cottage, followed by a powdered footman who carried a basket.

Being in the village one afternoon, engaged in errands of mercy, and for once having neither footman nor carriage with her, she took refuge from a passing shower

at the Shafto Arms. Mr. Green, the bald-headed landlord, came bustling out from behind the bar, bowing low over his folded hands. Would her ladyship please to step into the parlour?

"We've bin obliged to give up our parlour to my niece Mrs. Walter, as has come down to stay with us in a very poor state of 'ealth, I'm sorry to say; but if your ladyship would condescend to excuse of her bein' in the room, there's a nice fire burnin', *hand* I may say hevery comfort."

Mr. Green was evidently proud both of his niece and of his parlour; and Madge did not wonder at this when, having graciously acceded to his request, she was shown into a very prettily furnished room and into the presence of a tall, handsome woman, dressed in black, who, as the door opened, started up from the sofa upon which she had been reclining.

"Lady Shearman, of Brampton Priory, my dear," Mr. Green announced. "Her ladyship has been overtook by the rain

and is doing us the honour to shelter herself under our 'umble roof."

"Please don't let me disturb you," said Madge, advancing towards the sofa as the landlord withdrew; "I am sorry to hear that you are ill."

"Oh, I'm dying," answered the woman in black quietly. "With these chest complaints one never knows exactly how long a person may last; but it can't be many months in my case, the doctors tell me, and it seems natural to come home to die. A sort of instinct, I suppose."

It is also an instinct with most people to contradict those who declare themselves to be dying; but Madge looked at the waxen complexion and hollow cheeks of the speaker and felt that it would be a mockery to say what she had been going to say. This Mrs. Walter, notwithstanding her worn and wasted appearance, had the remains of great beauty. Her eyes were large and dark; her black hair was abundant, and her features were finely

chiselled. Her manner and speech, too, were somewhat more refined than one would expect those of an innkeeper's niece to be.

"You belong to these parts, then?" asked Madge at length.

"Yes, my lady, and I remember you well; though you wouldn't remember me. There was a deal of talk in this neighbourhood six years ago when Bessie Green ran away from her uncle's house, and I dare say a good many didn't credit the story of her being married to a rich gentleman of the name of Walter. However, seeing is believing; and here is Mrs. Walter back, as a widow, bringing her fortune with her."

This was said composedly enough, yet with a slight bitterness of intonation which made Madge fancy that the incredulity of the neighbourhood might not be wholly groundless. However, she asked no questions, but began, as her custom was, to chatter about herself, mentioning that

she found life at Brampton a little bit dull, and that she was unable to feel that absorbing interest in the poor of the district which had made Miss Shafto so popular.

"One is glad to do what one can to help them, of course," she said; "but the truth is that they are not very interesting."

Mrs. Walter smiled. "They are not at all interesting to such as you, my lady," she answered, "because they wouldn't think it worth while to tell you about anything except their illnesses and misfortunes. Still you have your own class to associate with. I have left my class and I haven't got into any other; so that for six years I may say I have lived alone, and now I see nobody from morning to night, except my uncle and aunt and the doctor, when he comes. That makes a person willing enough to die."

It sounded a miserable sort of existence to lead, and Madge was touched by a grievance which her own temperament enabled her to enter into thoroughly.

"Would it amuse you at all to see me if I looked in sometimes?" she asked.

The woman's face brightened up. "Indeed it would, my lady! It would be a real kindness. I've nothing to do but to read, and often I'm too tired for reading, so I just lie here and think and think, and wish the end would come."

Thus was initiated what speedily became almost a friendship. The sick woman took a great fancy to Lady Shearman, perhaps because, as is the case with many sick people, the mere sight of health and beauty refreshed her, perhaps because she somewhat overestimated the kindness of heart which prompted her ladyship's visits. Madge, for her part, was much interested in Mrs. Walter, whose history, she was sure, must be of a more romantic nature than had as yet appeared, and who, she hoped, might eventually feel impelled to divulge some of its episodes.

This hope was fulfilled quite abruptly one afternoon, when Madge, after paying a

round of calls, stopped her carriage at the Shafto Arms and entered the little sitting-room where Mrs. Walter was, as usual, lying on the sofa before the fire. The latter listened half-abstractedly for a while to what Madge (who was apt to be imprudently outspoken) had to say about the inanity of the ladies whom she had found at home, and then remarked, with a sigh—

"Well, it's odd how one's notions change! There was a time when I'd have given anything to be able to say I was on visiting terms with Lady This or Mrs. That; but now I shouldn't care about it if I could have it. It's not that the grapes are sour either. If I was well and strong again to-morrow I shouldn't want to live with my husband or to mix with his friends. My husband isn't dead, and his name isn't Walter. I dare say you've guessed that."

Madge shook her head wonderingly. "Who is your husband, then?" she asked.

"It's curious," answered the woman, smiling, "that nobody hereabouts should

have suspected the truth, but, to the best of my belief, nobody ever has, and I'd rather it wasn't known yet, though after I'm dead I suppose it won't matter much. Will you kindly keep it secret, my lady, if I answer your question?"

Madge having at once given the desired promise, Mrs. Walter resumed: "I've had an unhappy life, and nobody but myself is to blame for it; I know that now. I was a nasty-tempered girl, as my aunt could tell you, and I was an ambitious girl too, and I married a man whom I didn't care a pin's head about, for the sake of the position he never gave me. You don't recollect Lady Loddondale. She died before you came to these parts; and the old Lord was so cut up about his loss that he closed Warbury Park, and, I believe, never saw the place again to the day of his death. But one of his sons used to run down for a day or two at a time to consult with the bailiff or the land-steward; and so it happened that, as I was walking through

the woods on a summer's evening, I met a young gentleman who spoke to me, and we got talking, and he asked me to meet him again, and—and there! I needn't tell you all the rest. I was a handsome girl then—there's no harm in my saying so, now that I'm such a scarecrow—and he fell over head and ears in love with me, and the end of it was that I consented to run away to London with him and be married privately. He told me that his name was Lord Walter Sinclair——"

"Lord Walter!" ejaculated Madge aghast.

"So he told me. I never loved him; but I was pleased and flattered that he should love me, and I was willing to live quietly in the house that he took for me under the name of Mrs. Walter and wait until his father died; because he said it would mean ruin for us both if he acknowledged me while there was still time for Lord Loddondale to alter his will. He soon got tired of me, and I'm sure I don't wonder at it; for I didn't make things

pleasant for him. You see, I led the dullest kind of life; because he wouldn't be seen anywhere with me, and he was always away at race meetings, and, as I told you before, I have a nasty temper, and he himself was given to be peppery; so——"

"I can't help thinking that there is some mistake," interrupted Madge. "What was he like, this man whom you call Lord Walter Sinclair?"

"He was not handsome," replied Mrs. Walter composedly. "His hair was reddish, and he shaved his face clean like a groom."

"Then," exclaimed Madge, with some excitement, "he was not Lord Walter at all; and my firm belief is that, if your marriage was a real one—but I suppose it couldn't be, as he gave a wrong name?—you are Marchioness of Loddondale."

"I am quite aware of that, my lady," answered the Marchioness, with a slight smile. "I found out long ago who my

husband was, and a terrible fright I had till I heard from a lawyer that the marriage held good, in spite of the fraudulent entry of one of the parties. Indeed, it was about that that we fell out finally; though we were quite ready to quarrel before. He was a curious man; he always wanted to be getting the better of somebody, and from the very first he suspected that I had more fancy for being a lady than for being his wife. That was why he pretended to be Lord Walter; because I might have given myself out as Lady Warbury, and, the property being entailed, his father couldn't have ruined him. 'You can claim your rights,' he said, the day when we parted; 'I'm your husband, safe enough. But you can't make me live with you.'"

"And you didn't claim your rights?"

"No; for I had found out by that time that they would be of very little use to me. I shouldn't have been received. If I had had children it might have been different; but I had got disheartened, and my health

was beginning to give way, and I only wished to be left in peace. He was very liberal to me. He gave me an allowance large enough to keep me in comfort, and since he came into the title he has settled a handsome sum of money upon me, which my uncle and aunt will get when I'm gone."

"Does he know how ill you are?" asked Madge, after a pause.

"Not he! He never asks any questions. But he knows I'm here; I thought he had better be told of that: and I expect that's why Warbury Park is shut up. I had a request through the lawyers that I would move elsewhere, and an offer of a house in any other part of England that I liked to name; but I answered that I meant to stay where I was. He must put up with this little inconvenience; it won't be for long."

"And you might have been living at Warbury now, with all sorts of luxuries and heaps of servants to attend to you, and

—and everything!" was Madge's not unnatural comment upon this startling narrative.

"Do you think so, my lady? He's bound to maintain me, of course; but I'm not sure that he's bound to give me one of his houses to live in. Anyway, I would rather die here than there. And, do you know, my lady, I think I've got as good as I deserve. It's only the truth to say that I didn't behave well to him, and if I've shown some consideration for him by not claiming all that I might have claimed —well, perhaps we may cry quits. A woman who marries for a title or for money doesn't deserve to be very happy, does she? And I expect that most of the women who do that find out sooner or later that they have married for what they don't really care about. Then they mustn't blame their husbands."

Whether this last observation was intended to bear any special significance Madge could not feel quite certain; but

she suspected that it was, and, for the time being, the suspicion rather checked the flow of her sympathy with her confidant. However, she paid many subsequent visits to the so-called Mrs. Walter, who, notwithstanding her hardness of manner, was not ungrateful, and who always listened with a great deal of patience to the murmurs which (in the absence of Norma Shafto) Madge did not venture to breathe to any one else.

CHAPTER VI.

LORD WALTER RECOVERS HIS SANITY.

Rome (historical associations apart) is about as well fitted to be the capital of Italy as Athens is to be the capital of Greece; but in neither case, probably, could any other selection have been made; so that there is nothing for the Italians and the Greeks to do but to make the best of what can't be helped. The best that can be made, however, is not good and not convenient; and those of us who are old enough to remember Rome under the picturesque old Papal *régime* may be permitted to drop a silent tear over the very clean sweep achieved by the new brooms. Walter Sinclair, not having visited Italy during his childhood, was not old enough to be

distressed by any reminiscences of the period alluded to, and was consequently very well pleased with the city which remains what it always has been—the head-quarters of sculptors. He was lucky enough to obtain upon very moderate terms, from a friend whose health compelled him to return to England, the lease of a commodious studio in the Via Sistina; and, as he arrived very early in the season, he had few temptations to neglect the work to which he had determined to consecrate all his energies.

At the same time, it is not wholesome for anybody to work all day and every day without relaxation; nor would he have been suffered to do so if he had desired it. He had a few artistic acquaintances in the place, and these soon introduced him to others; also he knew the Embassy people, whose hospitality it was impossible to decline. Then, as the weather grew colder, the annual influx of English immigrants began to pour in; and amongst them was

his aunt Lady Spencer Sinclair, a well-to-do widow, whose winters were always spent in one southern city or another, and whose little dinners were as famous as they deserved to be, seeing that it was her habit to take her French cook about with her. Lord Walter, of course, had to dine with his aunt, and, equally of course, he met at her table persons with whom he subsequently had to dine. The truth is that it is by no means easy for the brother of a marquis to lead the life of a hermit or to brood in solitude over any sorrows with which he may be afflicted. In vain he protested that he did not mean to go into society that winter: it was pointed out to him with unquestionable truth that meeting half a dozen friends at dinner, or visiting picture-galleries and making excursions with them, is not going into society; and indeed he was not very unwilling to be convinced by such arguments. After all, he had come to Rome to be cured of his complaint, not to nurse it; and if he was

sometimes a little ashamed of the rapidity with which the cure was being effected, he was quite as often and quite as much ashamed of requiring any cure at all. For he saw now how ridiculous it had been on his part to fall in love with Madge Wilton; he saw that he had been fascinated, not by that young lady herself, but simply by her face and by certain little ways and tricks that she had; and his sensations, now that he had recovered his self-command, were very much those of one who, waking out of a vivid dream in which he has conducted himself like a lunatic, draws in his breath and thanks Heaven that he is not what he might have been. Lord Walter, but for the fortunate circumstance that his means were small, might have been the husband of a woman whom he would have ceased to love as soon as he found her out; and it was hardly to be supposed that he could have lived six months with her without finding her out.

One Sunday afternoon, having nothing

else to do, he strolled into the church of the Trinità de' Monti at the hour of vespers. The music at that church is still good, though perhaps not quite as good as it used to be, and the light is always dim, and the faint smell of incense and the solemn chanting do not fail to produce a certain impressive effect upon the emotional heretic. Lord Walter had been impressed there upon several previous occasions, and doubtless would have been so again if, quite at the beginning of the service, his attention had not been attracted by a face near the doorway which interested him to the extent of making him forget everything else in the pleasure of watching it. He was naturally pleased to see Miss Shafto again, and indeed he had been wondering for some time past whether she would make her appearance in Rome, as she had said that she might possibly do; but what struck him at the moment as it had never struck him before was the perfect beauty, not only of her features, but of her ex-

pression. She was listening to the music, if he was not, and she seemed to have been carried away by it; for her lips were slightly parted and there was a bright, eager light in her eyes, and Lord Walter, gazing at her, thought to himself that if she had lived in the time of Raphael, she would certainly have been immortalized. However, all things considered, he was not sorry that her advent into a world inhabited so largely by ugly persons had been deferred until the latter part of the nineteenth century. For the moment we are without a Raphael; but we have artists among us who can at least reproduce the lineaments of a lovely face, not to speak of sculptors who would be very glad to do their best in that direction if they might be allowed to try. The aspiring young sculptor who was watching Miss Shafto now had ample opportunity for studying her, because, as she was so much taller than her neighbours, her profile was clearly defined against the dark back-

ground of the curtain which hung before the doorway. He had made up his mind that he must really ask her to sit to him, and had had time to identify her with numerous allegorical and saintly subjects when the service came to an end and he pushed his way through the crowd towards her.

He reached her side just as she was in the act of stepping into the carriage that was waiting for her; but as soon as she recognized him, she turned round and descended on to the pavement again.

"I am so glad to see you!" she exclaimed heartily. "I have been hoping ever since we arrived that we might come across you somewhere."

Then she told the coachman that he could go away, and, turning to Lord Walter, "Perhaps you will kindly see me as far as the Piazza Barberini," she said, smiling; "it won't take you very long."

But it seemed that she was in no great hurry to be taken home; for when he had

expressed his willingness to be her escort, she did not at once set her face in that direction, but moved slowly towards the top of the steps which lead down to the Piazza di Spagna, and stood gazing at the city beneath her, and the great dome of St. Peter's, and the stone-pines above San Pietro in Montorio, which showed purple against the sunset glow.

"Isn't it perfect?" she exclaimed suddenly. "I can't think how anybody can be disappointed in Rome!"

"Nor can I, if you speak of it as a whole," he replied. "Some of the details are a little disappointing perhaps at first sight, and the new quarter is incomparably hideous. For my own part, I may say that Rome has more than answered my expectations; but then my expectations were not extravagantly high. Anyhow, I have attained my object in coming here."

"Yes?" she said, with a quick glance at him. "Your object, I suppose, was to study ancient and modern art in a place

where you were sure of meeting with the best examples of both."

"My object," he answered sturdily (for this was a thing which had to be said, and as he did not much like saying it, he thought he would get it over as quickly as possible), "was to rid myself of the remains of an attack of insanity; and I have succeeded. I am now quite sane."

"Well," said Norma, after a momentary pause, "I am glad of that; though I don't know why you should wish to make out that you were ever insane. It is a pity to set one's heart on things that one can't have; but it isn't crazy, and one can't always help it."

"Oh, one can't help it, if that is any consolation, and I quite agree with you that there's nothing crazy in wishing for what one can't have. But it is more or less crazy to imagine that people are what they quite obviously are not."

"But is that what you imagined?"

"I suppose so. I can't exactly tell what

I imagined; but, whatever it may have been, it certainly wasn't the truth, and it doesn't seem to me that I was altogether responsible for my vain imaginings. Now I have come to my senses again, and I don't feel particularly proud of that episode in my life, and I should like to forget it."

"I dare say that is the best thing you can do," said Norma. But in her heart she thought that he ought not to have been able to forget quite so easily; and if he wanted her to think well of him—as he undoubtedly did—he was setting to work rather clumsily.

"I hope you will honour my studio with a visit one of these days," said he, by way of changing the subject. "I am close by this, in the Via Sistina, and I have really been very busy since I came to Rome, so that there will be more of my handiwork for you to criticise here than there was in London."

"Did you ever finish that statue of Elizabeth of Hungary?" asked Norma.

"How can you ask such a question! Didn't you condemn it utterly?"

"I didn't mean to do that; and besides, if I had, what could it possibly have signified? I am no judge."

"Oh, excuse me; I think you are as good a judge as anybody of the particular point that you fastened upon; and Loddondale is a very fair judge of anatomy. He told me Queen Elizabeth had a game leg —which was quite true."

Norma laughed. "Do you know, we met your brother at Monte Carlo," said she; and then she remembered her conversation with Lord Loddondale and laughed again, the memory causing her no embarrassment.

"Loddondale never writes to me," remarked Lord Walter, "and I never know where he is or what he is doing. He is a queer sort of fellow."

"Yes, I think he is rather queer in some ways," agreed Norma; "but I like him, and I wish he would make up his

mind to marry some nice girl. He is not nearly as rough and rude as he pretends to be."

Now, Lord Walter had a shrewd suspicion that if his brother's hand and heart were ever offered to anybody, Norma Shafto would be the lady thus favoured, and this was an event which could not be contemplated with satisfaction or approval. Loddondale and Norma Shafto!—it was a kind of desecration to couple their names together.

"I don't think, you know," he said presently, "that Loddondale could ever be domesticated. His wife would have to be a person of strong sporting tastes; and even then——"

"He spoke very kindly about you," observed Norma.

"Did he? Well, I hope I am not speaking unkindly about him. I believe we are as good friends as our very opposite dispositions will allow us to be. My old aunt, Lady Spencer, who is here now, says

she means to take the head of the family in hand when she goes back to London and rouse him to a sense of his social duties. I have begged her to let me be present at the interview, which is likely to be a brief and animated one."

"Papa knows Lady Spencer Sinclair," remarked Norma. "He met her the other day; and this morning we had a note from her asking us to join a picnic to Frascati and Monte Cavo. Will you be of the party by any chance?"

"She invited me, and I refused," answered Lord Walter; "but since you are going, I think I'll withdraw my refusal and give myself a holiday."

"Do," said Norma; "I am sure it will be good for you."

But somehow or other she did not speak very enthusiastically, and he could not help noticing that her manner was less warm by several degrees than it had been at the opening of their conversation. That this was in any way due to the facility

with which he had got over a misplaced attachment did not occur to him; only, as they had now reached the entrance of the Hôtel Bristol, where the Shaftos were staying, he thought he would postpone to a more favourable opportunity the request which he had resolved to make. It is not everybody who cares to pose as a model, and he knew very well that, if Miss Shafto did consent to sit to him, he would have to trespass considerably upon her time and patience before he would be able to satisfy himself. So he took his leave, saying, "We shall meet again to-morrow then, I hope."

Without further loss of time, he went to call upon his aunt, who said, "Come by all means, if you like; only you will have to ride, I'm afraid, because the carriages will be full. I offered the place in mine which you wouldn't take to young Grey, who jumped at it when I told him that Miss Shafto was coming with me."

"You forgot to hold out that inducement to me."

"Well, I didn't know about it at the time, and I don't know much about her now. Is she so very attractive?"

"Perhaps not in the sense that you mean; but she is very beautiful, and I want to get her to sit for me. Anyhow, you will have to leave your carriage at Frascati, I suppose."

It was with this anticipation that Lord Walter had to comfort himself on the following day, as he cantered across the brown Campagna towards the Alban hills. He was not the only equestrian, and he did not enjoy the society of a lively and pretty little American lady as much as no doubt he would have done had he been able to listen to a word that she was saying. For every now and then they came in sight of Lady Spencer's carriage, and each time that they did so he saw Mr. Grey, that good-looking young Secretary of Embassy, making himself as agreeable as he could (and that was very agreeable indeed) to Norma. Now, to see any man

making himself agreeable to Miss Shafto was what Walter Sinclair had always disliked extremely. This, it must be admitted, was selfish of him; but he couldn't help it, nor could he help being annoyed with that fellow Grey, who really might have been contented with the half-dozen or so of flirtations which he already had in hand. Miss Shafto was not for the likes of Grey, and he was a little surprised at her caring to listen to the sort of prattle which Grey affected.

When Frascati was reached, and when those who did not feel disposed to attempt a fatiguing ascent under a hot sun took advantage of the donkeys that were in waiting, he thought his turn had come and resolutely attached himself to Miss Shafto; but what is the use of trying to talk sensibly if you are to be interrupted at every other word by the irrelevant rubbish of a garrulous young diplomatist? Lord Walter very soon had to acknowledge himself defeated, and, falling back to the rear,

said to himself that he had wasted a day by joining this stupid picnic.

Nevertheless, the picnic was pronounced a great success; and perhaps Lord Walter was the only person present who thought otherwise. The view from the summit of Monte Cavo over the undulating Campagna, with its ruined aqueducts, to the blue mist which hung over Rome and to snowy Soracte in the far distance was all that could be desired. So, too, were the viands and wines provided by Lady Spencer Sinclair. Lady Spencer always did things well. She had selected her company with care and forethought; and was she in any way to blame because a capricious nephew of hers had chosen to tack himself on to the party at the last moment and consequently found himself in the undesirable position of odd man out? As for Norma, she thought Mr. Grey very amusing—which indeed he was—and delighted in the scenery and the clear air and the remains of old Tusculum, which were duly

inspected; and she was quite astonished when, at the end of a pleasant day, Lord Walter, profiting by the momentary absence of the officious Grey, who had gone to summon the carriages, said crossly, "Thank Heaven, that is over!"

"Haven't you been enjoying yourself?" she asked. "I am so sorry. I thought everybody seemed to be in such good spirits."

"I suppose," observed Lord Walter, "you didn't happen to look at me. At least, if you did, and if I appeared to be in good spirits, I may conscientiously score one; because I don't know when in my life I have been more completely sold. I came here simply and solely with the hope of being able to talk to you, and I think we have exchanged about half a dozen words during the day."

"Oh—but had you anything particular to say?" asked Norma wonderingly.

"Nothing particular; but I should have been glad to be allowed the privilege of

offering a few general remarks. Not, of course, that I could have hoped to be as entertaining as Grey."

Norma stared at him for a moment and then began to laugh. "This is very flattering," she said. "Do you often make such speeches? If you do, I should think you must sometimes be misunderstood by inexperienced people."

"Why? I suppose anybody, experienced or inexperienced, can understand that it is rather provoking to see a friend whom you want to talk to monopolized the whole day by somebody else."

"Well," said Norma good-humouredly, "you must come and talk to me some other time. I am almost always at home after sunset, because papa is in mortal terror of my catching Roman fever, and I should be very glad to see you any day when you have nothing better to do."

There was surely nothing to complain of in so kind an invitation as that; yet, for some reason or other, Walter Sinclair rode

back to Rome in a bad humour, and the little American lady subsequently declared him to be the dullest Englishman whom she had ever met. Which, she was cruel enough to add, was saying a great deal.

CHAPTER VII.

BASIL MORLEY REVEALS A SECRET.

Perhaps Mrs. Walter (to give her the name by which she chose to be known) was not the best companion or the best adviser that Lady Shearman could have chosen; yet it came to pass that she served in both capacities to the latter, who had few friends of her own class and whose emotions and opinions, being so near the surface, could not be repressed without discomfort. Bessie Walter was in many respects unwomanly, and in none more so than in the hard and logical sense of justice which she possessed. She had married from ambitious motives; she had failed in her duty to the man whom she

had married; and she was, as she considered, deservedly punished. There was no important difference, that she could see, between her case and that of Lady Shearman, who represented herself as unhappy and disappointed, and whose husband, so far as could be judged from common report, was not very unlike Lord Loddondale. As a matter of fact he was very unlike Lord Loddondale, and Madge was very unlike Bessie; but possibly minor distinctions are less evident to those who are at the point of death than to those who have still the prospect of spending many years in a complicated world. Here was a woman who did not love her husband and who complained of his unreasonable and uncongenial ways: Mrs. Walter could only shrug her shoulders and say, "I should recommend you to make the best of him. There's nothing else to be done, you see."

"But he is so senseless!" Madge would protest. "He is jealous of everybody and everything that comes near me—even of

the dogs! He actually objects to my seeing much of my mother; he would certainly object very strongly if he knew that I was talking to you now."

"That wouldn't be surprising if he could hear what you are saying," Mrs. Walter would reply drily.

It never struck her as possible that Madge could feel anything beyond toleration for her husband; she attempted no defence of him, but contented herself with pointing out in more or less plain language that when one has made a bargain with one's eyes open, one must perform one's share of it, even though it should turn out to be a bad one. And this was the view of her matrimonial relations which Madge herself came to adopt. The bargain which she had made was not satisfactory; only she did not blame herself for having made it, because she still clung to the conviction that it had been made for her by the posse of relatives to whose united forces opposition would have been useless.

It is only fair to her to say that she might have married Sir Christopher for love and still found him a very trying person to live with. It is true that he was devoted to her—a little too devoted, she sometimes thought—but his devotion was not of that kind which implies the smallest self-sacrifice. He amused himself after his fashion, shooting or hunting every day of the week; yet he had no idea of allowing her to amuse herself after hers. If she had cared to participate in his pursuits to the extent of joining him and his friends when they were shooting the home coverts, or even of following the hounds, he would have been willing enough that she should do so; but it so happened that she had no sporting proclivities. She did not like standing about in damp, muddy places or scrambling through hedges, nor had she nerve enough to hunt. Consequently her life was a very dull one; for really it was not worth while to risk a scene for the sake of getting Basil Morley or some other

young men of the neighbourhood to drop in to five-o'clock tea.

Sir Christopher usually turned up at that hour, tired out with the exertions of the day; and if, as not unfrequently happened, he found his wife in a discontented humour, he put on an injured expression and wanted to know what was the matter. After dinner he generally fell asleep and snored, which was neither polite nor becoming, and at such times Madge said to herself that he looked extremely unlike a gentleman. No one, perhaps, would look very aristocratic with his head thrown back and his mouth wide open; but then there are some men of whom one cannot conceive that they would permit themselves to fall into such an attitude in the presence of a lady, and it occurred to Madge that Lord Walter Sinclair would never have done it. Furthermore, she sometimes reflected that Lord Walter was heir-presumptive to a marquisate and large estates; and although, to be sure, there

was every probability that the present holder of the title would soon be free to marry again, yet Lord Loddondale was a man who frequently rode in steeplechases and otherwise endangered his neck.

Well, of course there was no good in dwelling upon such thoughts as these; but everybody knows what a great difference there is between resigning one's self to a loss and acquiescing in the fact that that loss may turn to somebody else's gain. Madge, when she thought of Lord Walter, pictured him to herself as disconsolate and was really very sorry for him, having by this time quite forgiven his unreasonable behaviour in Scotland. Therefore she was not at all pleased to hear that he was enjoying himself greatly at Rome, and that he did not shun the social gaieties which the place afforded.

This information she obtained from Miss Travers one morning when, contrary to her custom, she had had herself driven to the meet. Miss Travers had latterly given

up hunting, having, as she declared, a difficulty in mounting herself, by reason of her increasing bulk; but there were few meets at which her dog-cart was not a prominent feature, and she generally contrived to see as much of the run as could be seen upon wheels. On this particular morning, however, she perceived at once that, drive as she might, there would be very little chance of her coming across the hunt again; so she determined that, instead of needlessly fatiguing herself and her horse, she would have a little chat with Lady Shearman. Descending from her lofty driving-seat, she marched up to Madge's victoria, and, planting herself beside it, with an elbow resting on the hood, opened the conversation by saying—

"I suppose you have heard from Norma Shafto, haven't you?"

"Not very lately," answered Madge. "The truth is I haven't written for some time."

"Oh, well, I had a letter from her this

morning. They are in Rome, you know, and having a fine time of it, she says. Walter Sinclair is there too—which I'm glad of."

"Is he? Why are you glad?"

"For reasons of my own. I have also heard from his aunt, who is spending the winter there, and who is an old friend of mine. She tells me that Walter is in the best of health and spirits, and that, though he is by way of being too busy to indulge in frivolous dissipation, he manages to see as much of his friends as he wants. That's the pull of being an artist or an author; when you think you are likely to be bored, you can always excuse yourself upon the plea of having work to do."

"I should think Lord Walter would very often excuse himself," remarked Madge.

"That's as may be. My private opinion is that his work doesn't prevent him from being present at any entertainment to which Norma Shafto has been invited."

Miss Travers, as she said this, looked

rather hard at the little lady in the victoria, who was aware that she was being looked at, yet could not help changing colour slightly. She smiled and said "Oh!"—which was doubtless intended to be provoking, and which had the desired effect.

"Well," rejoined Miss Travers sharply: "have you any objection to that?"

"Objection?" asked Madge, raising her eyebrows innocently, "oh dear, no! Why should I? I think it would be too delightful. Only, if that is why you are glad that Lord Walter is in Rome, I am afraid—— However, I may be mistaken, of course. I dare say you know much more about him than I do."

"I know you and he had a flirtation last season," returned Miss Travers coolly; "but last season was last season. You have had time to get married since; and I imagine, saving your presence, that Lord Walter has had time to forget all about you."

Madge had always been rather afraid of

old Nell, who, as she very well knew, was not to be snubbed or put to silence by any of the customary methods. "I don't know," she remarked plaintively, "why I used always to be accused of flirting with every man to whom I talked for five minutes at a time. One comfort is that accusations of that kind are not likely to be brought against me any more."

"Well, I hope not, I'm sure," said Miss Travers, with a short laugh. "As for Walter Sinclair, he wouldn't have suited you for long, and you certainly wouldn't have suited him. I really do believe that Norma and he are suited to one another, and that's why I'm so glad to hear that there is a prospect of their finding out each other's respective merits. She has a great many more than he has; still, taking him all round, he is above the average run of men."

"I suppose," observed Madge sweetly, "that nobody can be a better judge than you of what the average run of men are

worth. You must have had so many opportunities of studying them."

Miss Travers burst into a loud, jolly laugh. "Now, now, Madge," said she, "don't you try to be spiteful; it isn't in your line, and you can't manage it. Be thankful for that. Of course I'm as ugly as sin and as old as the hills, and no man has ever been bold enough to propose marriage to me. You don't imagine that you can hurt my feelings by reminding me of those undeniable circumstances, do you? Another time, when you want to hit me on the raw, you had better make some allusion to corpulence. I'm always telling people how fat I am getting; but I only do it in the hope of being contradicted. Well, I must be off. Don't say anything nasty about poor Walter when you write to Norma. She won't believe you if you do."

Miss Travers was not quite so indiscreet as the foregoing conversation may cause her to appear. For more reasons than

one, she was very anxious to see her beloved Norma married and provided for; she liked Lord Walter, and thought well of him; also she knew what irreparable mischief may be worked by a silly and jealous woman. Therefore she had deemed it advisable to prepare Lady Shearman's mind for what might shortly occur. "I don't think," she mused as she drove briskly homewards, "that there is much fear of her ladyship's putting her oar in now. She will be too angry to interfere."

Angry Madge undoubtedly was, and her vanity was wounded; but as vanity is not quite the same thing as pride, it is likely enough that, if Norma had been within reach, some of those "nasty things" would have been said to her about Lord Walter which Miss Travers had affected to think Madge capable of writing. Madge did not write at all; but during the next few days she thought a great deal about her former suitor, and was seriously displeased with him, as she considered that she had every

right to be. Faithless and shameless were among the least severe of the epithets which she mentally applied to him, and the only thing that consoled her was that Norma must well know him to be both.

Not long after this Sir Christopher and Lady Shearman were present at a large dinner-party, given chiefly in their honour, at one of the neighbouring houses. Sir Christopher abhorred provincial dinner-parties, and Madge was not particularly fond of such entertainments; still, anything was better than sitting at home, and when one has a whole wardrobe full of beautiful new frocks, it is a thousand pities not to wear them before they become old fashioned.

The dinner was heavy and tedious, as was also the host, an old gentleman with white whiskers and a high colour of whom Madge had always stood rather in awe, and whom she had to entertain as best she could, since he did not

seem to feel it any part of his duty to entertain her. This was uphill work; for she was not fortunate enough to hit upon any subject that interested the old gentleman (though she tried everything that she could think of, from fox-hunting to gout), and by the time that her hostess gave her the signal of release she was much exhausted and depressed. The conversation which ensued between the ladies in the drawing-room was not of a nature to raise her drooping spirits, and some idea of the depth of despondency to which she had sunk may be gathered from the fact that she was quite delighted when the door opened and Basil Morley ambled across the room towards her. Fatuous though Basil was, he was more amusing than he intended to be and a great deal more amusing than anybody else whom Madge could descry. Sir Christopher, it was true, disapproved of him; but Sir Christopher, who had been drinking the old gentleman's justly celebrated port, had brought

a radiant countenance out of the dining-room with him, and was probably not in a censorious mood.

Mr. Morley sank into a low chair, facing Madge, and resting his elbows upon the arms of it, formed a triangle with his long white fingers and thumbs, across which he smiled at her pensively. "Permit me," said he, "to congratulate you."

"Thanks," answered Madge; "but I don't know why I should be congratulated. If anything pleasant has happened to me, or is going to happen to me, you would make me sincerely grateful by telling me of it."

"I am afraid," said Mr. Morley, still smiling, "that I can't promise you any pleasant prospect, except that of a speedy deliverance from this bucolic feast. I only ventured to congratulate you upon the cheerfulness with which you have borne it up to now. You seem to accept life generally in a cheerful spirit; and that is very wise of you."

The speech, as well as the manner of its delivery, bordered upon impertinence; but Madge was not affronted. It was really a matter of so very little consequence whether Mr. Morley meant to be impertinent or not.

"One tries to be cheerful," she remarked; "but certainly life in the country at this season of the year is not gay for those who take no interest in the destruction of wild animals. If I could have my own way, I should always winter abroad."

"And can't you have your own way, Lady Shearman? I should have thought Sir Christopher could refuse you nothing."

"Would you indeed? Well, I haven't put him to the test yet; but I imagine that if I were to ask him to take me straight off to Rome, where the Shaftos are now, and where I should like to be, he would meet me with a kindly but firm refusal."

"Ah, yes; I had heard that the Shaftos were at Rome—and Lord Walter Sinclair

too," observed Mr. Morley, looking rather curiously at his neighbour.

"I suppose it was Miss Travers who told you that," said Madge, with a laugh which even to her own ears sounded a little harsh. "She has built up a whole romance upon the strength of the coincidence."

Mr. Morley threw back his head, closed his eyes, and exaggerated his smile.

"What on earth are you putting on that face for?" asked Madge, with pardonable exasperation.

"I do not think," he replied deliberately, "that Lord Walter Sinclair will ever marry Miss Shafto. It might—though that is not my personal opinion—be satisfactory if he would—or could. But, as I say, I do not think that he will."

This was more than flesh and blood could stand. "I don't believe you know anything at all about him or his intentions," said Madge. "If you mean that he is too poor, that isn't an obstacle which

Norma would be likely to consider for a moment."

Mr. Morley blandly signified that that was not what he meant. He was aware, he said, that Miss Shafto differed from other women in being entirely above mercenary considerations; he also ventured to think that she was in other respects so superior to her supposed suitor that she would scarcely accept his hand, even if he were at liberty to make such an offer to her. But——

"Do you mean to say that he is *not* at liberty?" Madge asked.

Mr. Morley replied by another question. "Can you keep a secret, Lady Shearman?"

It is needless to record Madge's answer; for to that especial query probably only one answer has ever been returned since the world began.

"Then," said Mr. Morley, "I will confide to you what I have never confided to anybody else; for I am no mischief-

maker. I have pretty good reasons for believing that Lord Walter is married already."

Madge guessed at once what was the mistake into which he had fallen, but she listened to him patiently while he related at great length how he had chanced to encounter the so-called widow who was living at the Shafto Arms; how he had been interested in her appearance; how he had made inquiries as to her history; how he had put this and that together, taking much pains about it ("I am rather good at circumstantial evidence," he remarked parenthetically); and how he now considered it to be as good as proved that "Mr. Walter" was no other than Lord Walter Sinclair.

Now, of course it was not for Madge to reveal the truth to him. She had promised not to do that; and the comment which she made upon his narrative was unexceptionable both in spirit and in form. "You have found a mare's nest, Mr.

Morley," said she. "I know Mrs. Walter quite well, and I am convinced that she is no more married to Lord Walter than she is to you."

Nevertheless, as she drove away beside the slumbering Sir Christopher, some queer notions found their way into her head. She hated the thought that Lord Walter had transferred his allegiance from her to Norma; she was very angry with him and would have liked to be revenged upon him. Yet she was not bad enough to contemplate seriously writing the letter to her friend which a really bad woman might have written; her iniquity did not go further than a half-wish that her conscience would allow her to do such a thing. But perhaps that was far enough.

As for Basil Morley, his reflections while he sat at his writing-table, burning the midnight oil, ran something on this wise: "So she hasn't forgotten the man; I thought she hadn't. And she is indignant and jealous, and she can't hide her emotions

—which makes her eyes sparkle and is decidedly becoming to her. This is most interesting."

And before he went to bed he had added a sonnet, entitled *Furens Femina*, to that collection which as yet no publisher had manifested any eagerness to issue.

CHAPTER VIII.

SIR CHRISTOPHER'S HUNTING IS STOPPED.

Basil Morley's sonnet may have been a talented composition of its kind and may have displayed an intimate acquaintance with the passions and weaknesses of woman's nature; but it certainly did not apply in any way to the lady who had had the honour of suggesting it. Nothing could have been less like a *furens femina* than Madge Shearman, nor was there the smallest likelihood of her assuming that tragic part which the poet felt that it would be instructive to contemplate. On the other hand, it must be admitted that she was very cross. It is a hardship to have nothing to do; although those who

have too much to do may smile at it and say that it is one which can only be voluntarily incurred. It is a hardship to be snapped at every time that you receive a visit from one of your friends. And it is a very great hardship—one of the greatest in the world, perhaps, as well as one of the commonest—to be perpetually misunderstood. There cannot be much comfort in being adored by a person who always misunderstands you. For these reasons the Shearman household was not a happy one, and doubtless it would have been more unhappy still if Sir Christopher had not been out of doors from morning to night. That, Madge said to herself, was something to be thankful for; but her general frame of mind was far from thankful, and there were many hours during which she wondered wistfully what would have happened if she had set her family at defiance and refused point-blank to become Sir Christopher's wife.

It was on a chilly, misty afternoon that

she was sitting before the fire indulging in speculations of this unprofitable kind. Half an hour earlier she had returned from her daily drive and from paying certain duty-calls. One must have reached the age of sixty to enjoy driving, or rather being driven; and to enjoy paying afternoon calls one must be near one's dotage. Madge had enjoyed neither. The book which she had been trying to read, and which had slipped down from her grasp to the hearthrug, had not entertained her. She was extremely sorry for herself, and at length began to cry a little in a feeble, peevish way. "What a wretched life I lead!" she thought. "One could bear a great calamity; everybody bears great calamities well; but to go on in this dreary monotony, without the least hope of things ever being better, would sour the temper of a saint."

All of a sudden the door was burst violently open, and her maid, a foolish, flighty woman whom Mrs. Wilton had

engaged for her just before her marriage, rushed into the room.

"What *is* the matter now, Evans?" asked Madge with some asperity. "What do you mean by bouncing in like that?"

"Oh, my lady!" gasped Evans, pressing one hand to her heart, "they've sent me in to break it to you, and I don't know how to do it! There's been a hawful haccident!"

"Has anything happened to Sir Christopher?" asked Madge, jumping up.

Evans wrung her hands and nodded her head vehemently. "Oh dear, oh dear, that I should 'ave to say it! But don't give way, my lady; for while there's life there's 'ope, and we must keep calm, indeed we must! The man as come to tell us of it says they'll be bringing him 'ome immediate. Rode into a quarry three or four 'undred feet deep he did—to think of it! And the 'orse killed on the spot, which one can't wonder! But we mustn't believe the worst till it comes."

The first effect of a shock is quite as often to sharpen the faculties as to deaden them. "This cannot possibly be true," said Madge quietly. "There is no quarry in the county three hundred feet deep, or anything like it."

"Oh, my lady," cried Evans, obviously disappointed at her mistress's composure, "what signifies a 'undred feet more or less? If you was to fall no more than the depth of this room you might break your neck."

There was no denying that. Madge started and fell back abruptly into her chair. Instantly the whole meaning and consequence of the situation flashed before her. A widow—mistress of great wealth—delivered from the man who had worried her life out—free to marry whom she pleased! Then, without a moment's delay, this vision was swept away by an overwhelming sense of shame. She could not help her thoughts—who can?—but she was horrified at herself for having enter-

tained them, and frightened to find that, even for those few seconds, she had wished for her husband's death. And now she became as agitated as Evans could have desired.

"We must do something," she exclaimed wildly; "we ought to be doing something! Why do you stand there staring? Have they sent for the doctor? Are they getting a bed ready?"

She hurried into the hall, where she found a little group of awestruck servants, to whom she gave half a dozen contradictory orders. She had completely lost her head and did not know what she was doing until, after an interval of the duration of which she had no remembrance, she found herself shaking hands with the doctor, whose dog-cart had just driven up to the door.

The doctor was a young man who had a reputation for skill, but who had only recently begun to practise in the neighbourhood. He looked anxious and impatient.

"You must try to control yourself, please," said he—and it was only on receiving that injunction that Madge became aware that she was sobbing hysterically—"if you are to be of any use—but of course you will not be of any use. They will get him here in ten minutes or so; and you had better be out of the way."

He drew her into the dining-room as he spoke, and shut the door.

"What has happened?" asked Madge, swallowing down her sobs. "Is he dead? Is he dying?"

"Neither, I hope; but I cannot speak positively yet. What happened was that he never saw the quarry until it was too late to pull up, and then he tried to clear it. The marvellous thing is that he very nearly succeeded. He might have plunged down a sheer fifty feet; as it was, his fall was broken. So far as I could ascertain the extent of his injuries by a hasty examination, he has broken his arm and two of his ribs; and there has been a slight

concussion of the brain, and of course contusions. More than that I can't say at present. Do you wish to telegraph to London for further advice? If so, no time should be lost."

The doctor's peremptory tone had the effect which it was intended to have of bringing Madge back to her senses. At his dictation, she wrote a telegram to a celebrated London surgeon and gave orders that it should be despatched immediately. Then she declared herself ready and able to do anything that might be required of her. But the doctor declined her offer of assistance.

"No," he answered not unkindly; "we shall do better without you. Sir Christopher is cut about the face, and although that is of small consequence, the sight would probably turn you sick. I would rather that you should remain quietly where you are until I come down again. It is a good deal to ask, I know; but I suppose you want to help us, and you can't help

us better than by sitting still and making no fuss."

To the present day that doctor entertains a high opinion of Lady Shearman's common sense and self-command. Perhaps he is right in declaring that very few wives would have consented so submissively to obey orders; no doubt he was right in guarding himself against having to look after a fainting woman while his attentions were urgently required elsewhere. But he probably did not realize what a relief it was to Madge to be spared what to her would have been the horrible duty of washing those "cuts about the face," to which he had alluded.

Nevertheless, the ensuing hour of solitude was terrible enough to her. She heard everything, as she sat there motionless, while the daylight faded into darkness—the slow grinding of wheels upon the gravel, the heavy tramp and shuffling of footsteps in the hall, the whispered orders, the hurrying of servants up and down stairs.

Then came a prolonged hush which seemed as though it would never end. She had begun to feel that she could not endure suspense for another five minutes, when the doctor stepped quickly into the room.

"Well, Lady Shearman," said he, "I think I may venture to assert that everything promises well. There is the possibility of internal injuries. Sir Henry, when he arrives, will probably tell you that we must wait another twenty-four hours before we can pronounce any decided opinion as to that. Meanwhile, there are no bad symptoms, and our patient has quite recovered consciousness. You may see him for a few minutes if you like."

Death, to which we are all condemned, and which, as most of us believe, is a mere break in the infinite continuity of our being, ought not to scare us much; and indeed, when a person with whom we are not brought into daily contact dies, we are but slightly, and for a very short time, affected by the incident. Yet, for some

reason which is not very clear, only the worst of men and women really desire that death should remove a member of their own families. Moreover, Madge had not yet got over the horror of that half-murderous thought which had crept into her mind. She jumped up and caught the doctor by both hands.

"Oh, thank you!" she exclaimed gratefully.

The doctor laughed. "You had better thank your husband or his horse," said he. "If either of them had faltered, all the surgeons in England could have done no good. It makes one very sorry to think that the poor brute broke his own back, though he saved his master's neck."

This—oddly enough, as it seemed to Madge—was the first comment upon the accident which suggested itself to Sir Christopher. He was a man of far stronger affections and deeper feelings than his wife's, and the tears came into his eyes when he was told that poor Nero had had

to be shot. He was evidently more distressed about this than about his own injuries or the shock which Lady Shearman had sustained, though he was glad to see her when she stole timidly to his bedside, and smiled at her, and squeezed the small trembling hand which she extended to him. For the rest, he was very quiet and patient, notwithstanding the pain that he was suffering.

"'Tis a bad sign," Evans declared, shaking her head. "When you see a 'ot-tempered man—which no one can deny that his temper was 'ot—laying on his back as meek as a lamb, you may be sure that the hend is at 'and."

Such, however, was not the view taken by the great London surgeon, who arrived at ten o'clock and stayed the night, and who, on the following day, was able to confirm fully the favourable prediction of his country colleague. Sir Christopher would live; but he was not likely to leave his bed for a good many weeks to come,

and there would certainly be no more hunting for him that year.

It is in times of adversity, we are often assured, that a man's true nature displays itself, and we can never tell what any one is worth until we have seen what sort of a face he can put upon danger or pain or sickness. Perhaps so; but courage and endurance, though fine qualities, are scarcely required in everyday life, and both may be possessed by one who is nevertheless a very disagreeable person to live with. Sir Christopher, to give him the credit which is his due, certainly shone as an invalid. During several weeks of pretty constant suffering and frequent sleeplessness he never uttered a word of complaint, and the gratitude which he expressed to his wife in return for such small attentions as reading the newspapers to him or rearranging his pillows was not a little pathetic. Madge felt it to be so, and became almost affectionate in her sympathy and remorse.

One may say, without much fear of con-

tradiction, that no man can ever fall in love with a wife whom he has not married for love; but the nature of women is in some ways so strange and so unlike our own that one hesitates to declare the impossibility of the converse event. At any rate, Madge had never liked Sir Christopher so much as she did now, and if he had only remained a cripple for the rest of his days he would perhaps have had no reason to complain that his wife neglected him.

Unfortunately, as he grew stronger he grew fretful — which is no uncommon thing with convalescents—and so the old troubles began all over again. Mrs. Wilton had taken up her quarters at Brampton during her son-in-law's illness, and since she had discreetly abstained from entering his room, he had made no protest against a visit which, under the circumstances, could scarcely have been forbidden. However, he did not like Mrs. Wilton, and the very first day that he came downstairs he had a little passage of arms with her. She had

been ordering the dinner, it appeared; and, on finding this out, he told her in so many words that his servants had no instructions to take orders from anybody except Lady Shearman and himself.

"Once allow that sort of thing to begin and there's an end of all discipline," he grumbled. "I suppose I shall have to give them the sack, from the housekeeper downwards."

"Pray do not put yourself to that inconvenience," answered Mrs. Wilton, who was not prepared to be quite as submissive to an actual as she might have been to a prospective son-in-law. "It will answer all the purpose if you give me the sack; and now that I can be of no further use here, I shall be very glad to return home."

After that Sir Christopher made a sort of apology; but it was not accepted, and Mrs. Wilton took her departure in justifiable displeasure.

Then there was a great disturbance because Basil Morley called one afternoon,

and had an interview of half an hour's duration with Lady Shearman.

"Do you wish to condemn me to solitary imprisonment for life?" exclaimed Madge in despair. "If you do, you had better say so at once, and I will tell the servants that nobody is ever to be admitted again."

"Living with me appears to be your notion of solitary imprisonment," observed Sir Christopher. "I am not condemning you to anything of the sort; only, as I told you once before, I don't wish you to make a friend of that fellow Morley. Besides, I should think that, while I am in this state, you might very well say 'Not at home' when people come bothering."

He was not always in so fractious a mood. Every now and again he relapsed into cheerfulness and kindliness, even going so far as to admit that it must be very slow work for his wife to be tied all day long and every day to a helpless man.

"I'll tell you what it is, Madge," he said suddenly one evening; "when I'm a bit

stronger we'll be off somewhere south till the warm weather begins. If your hunting is stopped, there's no more beastly country in the world than England in spring. What do you think of taking a run as far as Rome and looking up the Shaftos?"

Madge's heart gave a great bound and then stood still. If any one had asked her what she would like best at that moment, and if she had been compelled to return a truthful answer, she would have had to say that she would like to be taken to Rome. Latterly she had received many letters from Norma, who had heard of Sir Christopher's accident and was anxious for news of his progress—letters in which a good deal was said about the sights and attractions and society of Rome, but which contained not one single allusion to Lord Walter Sinclair. This was undoubtedly a strange and suspicious omission. Madge had tried not to think too much about it, and had, with some difficulty, abstained from introducing Lord Walter's name into

her replies ; but she had been very eager—very pardonably eager, as it seemed to her—to discover how much ground there was for Miss Travers's conjectures ; and now, in this surprising and most unexpected fashion, an opportunity was offered to her of verifying or refuting them by the evidence of her own senses. To her credit it must be recorded that she had a moment of compunction. Sir Christopher evidently did not know that Lord Walter was in Rome ; and she determined to tell him of it, bringing out her information somewhat hurriedly and awkwardly, lest she should yield to the temptation to hold her tongue.

"I should like it of all things," she answered. "It would be very nice to see the Shaftos, and—and there's another friend of ours there—Lord Walter Sinclair. He has taken a studio for the winter, I believe."

It may be that when one is jealous of everybody one ceases to be jealous of any one person in particular ; and Sir Chris-

topher, who had once regarded Lord Walter as a rival, seemed to have forgotten that circumstance. "Oh, *he's* there, is he?" was his only comment upon Madge's communication. "I don't much care about Sinclair. Conceited sort of fellow, I always think. However, we needn't see more of him than we choose, I suppose."

With that he dropped the subject; but he recurred to it in the course of a day or two, and it is needless to add that his plan met with no opposition. After all, Madge thought, there was no reason in the world why she should not meet Lord Walter, nor any reason why her husband should object to her doing so. She had given him the chance of making an unreasonable objection: more than that she was surely not bound to do.

CHAPTER IX.

CHARITY.

Walter Sinclair, like most people who have the artistic temperament, was somewhat hyper-sensitive; but even if he had not been so, he must have noticed that Miss Shafto was not quite so pleased to meet him again as he was to meet her. He was sorry for that and a little disposed to be affronted, not seeing what he had done to forfeit her friendship; but as he did not wish to make himself ridiculous by showing temper, he called at the Hôtel Bristol a few days after the Frascati excursion, and, having sent up his card, was admitted into the sunny little sitting-room which Mr. Shafto had secured for the winter months. Unfortunately, Mr. Grey had

selected the same day and hour for paying his respects to a lady whom he much admired; and Lord Walter's entrance interrupted that versatile young gentleman in the midst of a comic song, the accompaniment of which Norma was playing for him, and which seemed to be affording her considerable amusement.

Well, it really was rather a funny song, and Grey, who was easily persuaded to sing the concluding verses, had great skill in the way of facial contortion; and if Norma laughed heartily at his performance, that was no more than many persons of the highest intellect and culture had done before her. But Lord Walter could not manage to laugh. The association of Miss Shafto with vulgar buffoonery produced the effect of a horrible discord upon him, and as he could think of no remark that would be at once appropriate and civil, he sat still and held his tongue.

"Miss Shafto," said Grey, strolling away from the piano and planting himself in

front of Lord Walter, whom he contemplated for a moment with interest, "I am sorry to tell you that Sinclair has a poor opinion of you. It's a bad job; but there's no mistake about it—he is disappointed in you. You see, he thought you had a soul above music-hall ditties."

"I am quite sure that he thought nothing of the kind," returned Norma, laughing. "He knows very well that, when I am in London, I am a staunch supporter of a temperance music-hall, where we are as vulgar as our patrons will allow us to be."

"Miss Shafto suits herself to her company," said Lord Walter; "one doesn't find out in a day what her own tastes are."

"That," observed Mr. Grey placidly, "is pretty straight. I suppose I may as well go away now. Then you'll join that riding-party to-morrow, will you, Miss Shafto? And I shall see you after church on Sunday, and I'll remember to get those tickets that you wanted."

There was a good deal more murmuring and making of appointments while he took his leave, and it struck Lord Walter that he need not have been so long about it. Certainly there was no occasion for him to hold Norma's hand the whole time.

"He is a nice little man; don't you think so?" said she, as soon as he had departed.

"Yes," agreed Lord Walter, smiling; "yes—he is a nice little man."

"Oh, but I didn't mean that; I meant that he is really nice. Why don't you like him?"

"I do like him; I like him very much in his way. Only, somehow, I shouldn't have fancied that you would."

"I like all sorts of people. Everybody can't be a sculptor, you know."

"If that means that you have any predilection for sculptors as a class, I will try to forgive you for playing Grey's accompaniments," said Lord Walter, who felt that he had been upon the verge of behaving foolishly and was anxious to change the

subject. "There is one humble sculptor who has had his studio carefully swept every morning for some time past in the hope of your patronizing it by a visit."

"We quite intend to drop in upon you as soon as we have a spare half-hour," answered Norma, "but we seem to have been so full of engagements lately; and then there is all the sight-seeing to be done. When do you do your sight-seeing? I suppose you rather hate to find yourself in a crowd of tourists; still you can't altogether neglect the Vatican and the picture-galleries."

This sounded something like an invitation; and Mr. Shafto, coming in at that moment, was so good as to second it in plainer terms. "Was Norma trying to secure your services as a guide to the picture-galleries, Sinclair?" he asked, after shaking hands with his visitor. "If you would take pity upon us and tell us what we ought to admire, and why we ought to admire it, we should feel deeply indebted

to you. Norma knows more about art than I do; but that isn't saying much. We are both badly in want of a competent instructor."

Walter was very willing to make himself useful in that capacity, and it was at once arranged that he should accompany his friends to the Palazzo Borghese on the following day. As a matter of fact, Mr. Shafto was by no means as ignorant of art as he affected to be; while Norma, if she was not particularly well instructed in the matter of technicalities, had an eye for form and colour which required very little educating. Also she seemed to enjoy the disquisitions for which her mentor duly apologized.

"Why are you so afraid of being thought pedantic or dictatorial?" she asked, smiling. "You are talking about what you thoroughly understand, and you have every right to lay down the law. Besides, if you didn't, how should I discover what the law is?"

She became quite friendly and like her former self while he was expatiating to her upon the painter's and the sculptor's craft. It was very true that she suited herself to her company, and that not from any insincerity, but simply because the power of sympathy was so strong in her. Only Walter always noticed (for this morning spent at the Borghese Gallery was only the first of a series during which most of the collections in Rome were visited) that as soon as he quitted that topic a certain undefinable constraint came over her manner. She was interested in him as an artist, it appeared, but not as an individual; nor did she care to hear about his plans and prospects, except in so far as they related to the avocation which he had taken up. The promised visit to his studio was never paid; and as for requesting her to pose as his model, he had not the courage to hint at such a thing. He was, in truth, a little afraid of her, which surprised and amused him when he realized it, because it

was not much in his way to be afraid of anybody. However, notwithstanding these drawbacks, he found her companionship very pleasant; and Mr. Shafto, who strayed about in his restless fashion from picture to picture, frequently meeting with acquaintances in the course of his wanderings, was no restraint upon freedom of intercourse.

One morning, as these three persons were leaving the Palazzo Sciarra, a peasant woman with two ragged children, who had been waiting outside and had apparently been in conversation with Mr. Shafto's Italian servant, rushed forward and intercepted Norma, whose hand she kissed, and whom she began to address with voluble and lachrymose eloquence.

"Now, isn't that like Norma!" exclaimed Mr. Shafto to Lord Walter, who was a few paces in the background. "*Cœlum, non animum*, you know. Wherever she goes, she is bound to have poor people running after her, and she has

already acquired a long list of out-at-elbows *protégés* here."

"Who is the woman?" Lord Walter asked.

"*I* don't know! Where she picks these people up is a mystery to me; but I suppose they are like vultures and scent her from afar."

"I dare say you are not much better," observed Lord Walter, laughing; for Mr. Shafto had begun to fumble surreptitiously in his pocket.

"Better? My dear fellow, I'm a thousand times worse. When I see folks with pinched faces and bare feet, I bestow a trifle upon them and retire under a hail-storm of benedictions. That isn't Norma's way at all. She finds out all about them and penetrates into the dens where they live, and gives herself no end of trouble to procure work for them which they won't always do. Norma is the impersonation of true charity; as for me, I cannot be said to personify anything beyond a lazy sort of good-nature."

This was so absolutely true that there was no disputing it. Walter made no rejoinder, but stood gazing at the little group in the sunshine—the black-haired Roman peasant, with her attendant imps; the tall, beautiful lady whose blue eyes expressed nothing but pity and kindliness. Well, if the lady had not been Norma, he might perhaps have laughed at her for believing the pack of lies with which she was in all probability being assailed; but as it was, he did not think the worse of her for being credulous—if indeed she was credulous. He remembered that "Charity suffereth long and is kind; charity hopeth all things, believeth all things;" and it came into his mind that if ever Miss Shafto could be prevailed upon to sit to him, it should be in the character of Charity that her image should be presented to the world.

Later on the same day Lord Walter chanced to be in the studio of a brother-sculptor, a young Frenchman who had

achieved renown by some daring flights of fancy; and to him he mentioned the nature of the work he had in contemplation.

"Charity?" said the Frenchman, with a shrug of his shoulders. "That is not very original, is it? Besides, you can't manage it without a group. A single figure would require an inscription on the pedestal, and it is always humiliating to have to explain one's self."

"Much depends upon the single figure," observed Lord Walter.

"And a little, perhaps, upon the sculptor. Have you found her then—your Charity? And are you quite sure that she does not represent Love?"

Lord Walter was quite sure of that, and said so with unnecessary emphasis. "I think I have found her," he added; "I don't know that I have secured her."

Indeed, he was far from confident that he would be able to secure her. There were a good many difficulties in the way;

and, reflecting upon these during the two following days, he decided at length that, as a preliminary measure, he would call upon his aunt Lady Spencer Sinclair, to whom he owed a visit.

He was a favourite with Lady Spencer, otherwise perhaps he would not have been admitted; for her carriage was at the door, and he found her arrayed for her afternoon drive in magnificent furs and a new bonnet —which last she was examining anxiously in front of a Venetian mirror.

"How do you do, Walter?" said she, without turning round. "Does this bonnet really make me look such a guy, or is it the fault of the glass?"

"It is the fault of the glass," replied Lord Walter unhesitatingly; "there must be something radically wrong with any glass that could make you look like a guy. You are the handsomest woman in Rome, my dear aunt, and I believe you know it."

Lady Spencer had been a famous beauty somewhere about the time of her nephew's

birth. She was now inclined to be stout; her chin had become a double one, and her abundant hair had turned as white as snow, but she was certainly a very handsome old lady. She was not ill-pleased by the extravagant piece of flattery addressed to her, although she was sharp enough to guess that, after that, she might expect to be asked a favour of some kind.

"Great as my charms are," she remarked, "they may be neutralized by an ugly bonnet. You need not say that it is a pretty bonnet; because I neither designed it nor bought it. It was purchased by my maid, who, I should think, must have had an eye to reversionary interests. If it will not jar too much upon your feelings to sit beside it you might come for a drive with me, and afterwards I would take you to pay some visits."

"I should like nothing better," replied Lord Walter: at which Lady Spencer burst out laughing.

"He would like nothing better than to

pay a round of calls! What a very strange young man! Is there, by any chance, some particular person whom you would like to call upon?"

"Well, if you were driving in that direction, I should rather like to call upon the Shaftos. Between ourselves, I have set my heart upon getting a sitting from Miss Shafto, and I wanted to consult you about it. Is it the sort of request that one could make without impertinence?"

Then he explained at some length the conception which he had formed, pointing out how important, and indeed almost essential, it was that an artist who desired to give a particular expression of countenance to the figure upon which he was at work should be able to copy that expression direct from his model instead of doing his best to reproduce it by an effort of memory. As it happened, Miss Shafto, and nobody else in Rome—perhaps nobody else in the world—could provide him with what he required.

To all this Lady Spencer listened with an amused look. "Well," she said, "you can but make your request. You have my best wishes."

"Thanks; but you are always so kind that I was rather in hopes you might go a little further than wishing me success. You see, if she were to begin by refusing —and that isn't at all unlikely—I couldn't very well say any more, could I? Whereas, if you were there to back me up—— "

"Do you seriously think that my persuasion would be more effectual than yours?"

"I certainly do. Besides, there are some trifling obstacles which you might so easily smooth over. For instance, Miss Shafto couldn't, of course, come to my studio alone, and I dare say her father wouldn't much care about sitting there, twirling his thumbs for an hour at a time."

"Oho! now we have come to the point. Upon my word, Walter, you are pretty cool! Will it amuse me, pray, to twirl

my thumbs in your studio? And do you really suppose that I don't see through this ingenious artifice of yours? Charity indeed! If a representation of Charity is what you want, it would be a good deal more to the purpose to make a study of your aunt. Then perhaps I might ask Miss Shafto to come with me and keep me company—which I presume would do equally well."

"I am not employing artifice at all," Lord Walter declared; "you never were more mistaken in your life. I have a very great admiration for Miss Shafto; but I am not in the least smitten with her. I have told you the simple truth—if only you were not too clever to believe it."

"To be sure," continued Lady Spencer musingly, without taking any notice of this interpolation, "she is a nice girl and she is well-bred, and as she has neither brothers nor sisters, I presume she will be comfortably off one of these days. You might do worse. Well, come along then;

I am good-natured if I am anything. All I stipulate for is that your studio shall be properly warmed. I won't submit to draughts, even in the cause of charity."

Ten minutes later, Lady Spencer and her nephew were shown into the presence of Miss Shafto, whom they had the good fortune to find at home and alone. Lord Walter had not thought it worth while to persist in contradicting his aunt, who was not very fond of being contradicted. After all, her misinterpretation of his motives was of no great consequence. The principal thing was that she should have consented to act as his ally; and indeed he had no reason to complain of her in that capacity.

Norma, on being informed of the greatness which it was proposed to thrust upon her, did not at first seem to be either flattered by the suggestion or very willing to agree to it; but Lady Spencer was an adroit old woman.

She said, "My dear, it will be a horrid

bore for us both; there's no use in pretending that it won't. Walter knows that so well that he hadn't the courage to come and make his request by himself; but if you could bring yourself to give up these few hours to him, you might be laying the foundation of his fortune. Artists aren't like other people. They have their inspirations and their fancies, and when they are thwarted, I suppose they pretty generally fail."

Now, to refuse a service to a fellow-creature was what Norma always found a great deal more difficult than to grant it. She was not very anxious to sit to Lord Walter, nor did she much relish the idea of being publicly exhibited in the character with which—as it seemed to her—he had rather absurdly chosen to identify her; but if she could be of any real use to him by standing or sitting in an uncomfortable attitude for an hour or so at a stretch, that was a small sacrifice of convenience on her part to which he was heartily welcome;

and she answered to that effect. "Only," she added, "I must hear what my father has to say about it before I can make any promise."

"Oh, I'll undertake your father," said Lady Spencer, laughing. "Now, Walter, we won't detain you any longer. I'm going to take Miss Shafto for a drive, if she will come with me."

So Lord Walter, after expressing his gratitude in a few words, retired, perceiving that Norma might possibly have some scruples which would be more easily mentioned and overruled when he was out of the way.

CHAPTER X.

LORD WALTER IS ENLIGHTENED.

"This is really very good of you," said Lady Spencer, as soon as her nephew had taken his leave, "and it is just like our impudence to expect you to take so much trouble for us. All I can plead by way of excuse is that when Walter came and entreated me to support him I hadn't the heart to refuse. I do want him to get on in the profession that he has chosen, poor fellow, and I think he may make something of this study if he is allowed to have his own way about it."

"Oh, the trouble is nothing," answered Norma; "I don't mind that at all."

"Perhaps you are thinking about the proprieties, then? Well, I admit that that

is a point which has to be considered. But, you see, you will be under my wing; and I may boast without vanity that my character stands high. If I say it's all right, you may be pretty sure that other people will say so too. You won't be accused of designs upon this struggling sculptor, and if he is suspected of admiring you, I suppose that won't matter much."

Norma laughed. "Not very much; but I shouldn't think that it was at all likely to be said. Most of our friends know that Lord Walter and I have been acquainted from childhood."

"Then what is it that you are not quite pleased about? Because I can see that there is something."

Upon reflection, Norma found herself unable to answer this question, though she did not deny the fact. "If I can be of any service to him, I shall be very glad," she said at length, in a tone which sounded as though she desired to close the discussion.

So the ladies went out for their drive

together, and, drawing up at last upon the sunny Pincian, were soon surrounded by a crowd of idlers. The elder of the two, while dispensing social amenities with her usual grace and good humour, kept a watchful eye and ear upon the younger, and was contented with the result of her observation.

"She will do very well indeed," Lady Spencer thought to herself. "She has a nice, natural manner, and she is no fool. The only question is whether Walter will succeed with her. I don't feel as sure about that as I do that he will make the attempt."

Meanwhile, Lord Walter's doubt was whether he would be able to succeed with Miss Shafto in an artistic sense, and as to that he did not feel sure at all. It was not a very easy task that he had undertaken, nor, when he began trying to work it out, could he help admitting the justice of his French friend's criticism. Originality in the choice of a design is of small importance as compared with the execution of the design when

chosen; but originality covers a multitude of sins, and the lack of it is fatal to mediocrity. However, he was determined to exert to the utmost those powers which he knew that he possessed; and when, on the day appointed for the first sitting, Lady Spencer and Miss Shafto were ushered into his studio, he had a rough sketch ready to submit to them with which he hoped that they would not be dissatisfied.

They were, at all events, very well satisfied with the preparations which had been made for their reception. The studio, as has been said, belonged to a friend of Lord Walter's who was well-to-do, and who knew how to make himself comfortable. It boasted of an open fireplace, in which a bright wood fire was blazing cheerfully; a considerable portion of the tiled floor was concealed by Persian rugs; close to the fire was a low sofa, and beside it a table, upon which lay all the latest English newspapers and magazines; wherever standing-room could be found for them were great bowls

of roses and violets; finally, upon the daïs where Miss Shafto was presumably expected to take up her position, an easy-chair and a footstool had been placed.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Lady Spencer, surveying the scene through her double eye-glasses, "we do things in style, it seems. People who can afford to smother themselves in roses like this must be driving a roaring trade. Is that dancing figure your own doing, Walter? It is perfectly charming! Why didn't you ask me to come here before? I would have given you an order."

She went round, examining the different works upon which Lord Walter had been engaged since his arrival in Rome, while he exhibited his sketch to Norma. It was that of a standing figure in flowing Greek drapery, the arms bare to the shoulders, the hands slightly advanced from the body, with the palms turned outwards. The pose was easy and graceful, and the face was a very faithful likeness of Norma

Shafto. She looked at it in silence for a minute or two and then handed it back to him.

"I think it will be a beautiful figure," she said; "but isn't it perhaps a little too cheerful? Ought Charity to look so happy?"

"You look cheerful and happy," he answered.

"But this is not to be a statue of me; it is to be a statue of Charity," objected Norma.

"Well, that is why I want it to have your expression. If I were poor and in misery, I would rather be smiled upon than wept over."

"Of course," agreed Lady Spencer, seating herself on the sofa by the fireside. "Tears are very seldom becoming to anybody, and I can't imagine anything more frightful than a blubbering statue. And now let us get to work."

Not much work however was done either on the first day, or the second, or the third,

and Norma soon perceived that this was going to be a long business. It was only for the study of the head, Lord Walter explained to her, that her presence was requisite. A good deal of progress therefore might be made between whiles, and more was being made during the sittings than was actually apparent. But how many of these he would have to ask her for he was quite unable to say as yet. He hoped she did not find it very tiring and disagreeable.

As a matter of fact, she found it neither the one nor the other. Very little constraint as to attitude was imposed upon her; it interested her to watch the sculptor at work, and Lady Spencer's conversation was highly entertaining. Lady Spencer, for her part, declared that she did not care how often she had to discharge her humble, necessary functions.

"One must read the newspaper somewhere," she observed, "and one might as well read it here as anywhere else."

Not that she did read it (for she was

a loquacious old lady, and could not bring herself to sit silent while there was anybody within reach to be talked to); but she held it in her hand and occasionally favoured her audience with paragraphs of a personal nature and comments thereupon. The conversation was almost invariably in the form of a duologue. Lord Walter took scarcely any part in it, but contented himself with listening and with watching the varying expression of his sitter. It varied a great deal and very often; and that, as he had remarked to Miss Travers long before, made it extremely difficult to seize; but he had good hope that, by dint of patience, he would be able at last to get what he wanted. It had, at all events, become very clear to his mind's eye. In the mean time he greatly enjoyed hearing her talk, and the admiration which he had always felt for her character grew more and more. As might have been expected, the two ladies spoke rather of people than of things; and it was curious to notice

that one of them had nothing but what was good to say of anybody. Lady Spencer was not an ill-natured woman; but, like the rest of the world, she often made remarks about her friends which she would not have cared that they should hear. This Norma never did, and what struck Lord Walter was not so much that she abstained from evil-speaking (which a good many people contrive to do after a very eloquent fashion) as that she had no unkind thoughts. He could not refrain from remarking upon this, one day, to his aunt, though he knew that he would be laughed at.

"Do you think Miss Shafto deserves any credit for being good?" he asked. "It seems to me that she simply can't help it, just as you and I can't help periodical lapses into sin."

"Speak for yourself," returned Lady Spencer. "What do you know about my periodical lapses? As for your divinity, she is a good girl; but, not being in love

with her, I take her to be a human being. Probably you will some day see your way to agreeing with me there."

He smiled and did not protest against his aunt's fixed idea. It was natural enough that a looker-on should mistake his admiration for love.

The looker-on, of course, had seen most of the game, and the enlightenment of one of the players was a mere question of time. The truth flashed across Walter Sinclair quite suddenly one morning, when a message reached him from Miss Shafto to the effect that she would be unable to keep her usual engagement, as she was going out riding with her father. His disappointment was so keen and so out of all proportion to its cause that a brief process of self-examination was inevitable; and indeed a very brief one sufficed. Women, it is said, are frequently in love without knowing it; but such experiences are not very common with men. Nevertheless, Walter was convinced that he had always

loved Norma, and that the passing passion which he had felt for Madge Wilton had been utterly unreal. This is what burnt-out passions must always appear to have been; but perhaps in his case there was rather more excuse than is usual for the adoption of that view. He remembered a great many circumstances which lent support to it. He remembered how annoyed he had been with Nell Travers for declaring that Norma "would never look" at him, and how extremely distasteful it had always been to him to see Miss Shafto approached by any man who bore the semblance of a possible admirer. He remembered also how he had shuddered at the idea that his brother was becoming fascinated by one whose nature and habits raised her so far above the level of a rowdy sportsman. In short, he persuaded himself with such ease that Norma was the first and only—as she certainly would be the last—love of his life, that he failed to foresee the difficulty that might eventually

arise in persuading her of that truth. He was not a very practical man, although that was what he rather prided himself upon being. In some ways he was clear-sighted, seldom deceiving himself as to plain matters of fact; but the ideal was far more attractive to him than the real, and he was a good deal given to dreaming.

He fell to dreaming now, having been deprived of his morning's occupation, and presently carried his castles in the air out to the Borghese gardens, where he spent an hour happily enough, wandering among the by-paths and grassy glades, and rejoicing in the warm sunshine; for the early Roman spring, which is so often interrupted by returns of winter, had already set in.

As he was walking up the Via Babuino, on his way homewards, he chanced upon the woman who had accosted Norma outside the Sciarra Palace. She recognized him, showing her white teeth and murmuring, "Buon giorno, Signorino;" so he

stopped her, for he thought it would be pleasant to hear Norma's praises sung.

Of this gratification he was not defrauded. At the first mention of Miss Shafto's name her *protégée* broke forth into a eulogy which in respect of energy and exuberance of diction left nothing to be desired. Perhaps southern people are more grateful than we are; certainly they appear to be so. Lord Walter could not discover that Norma had done anything for this poor woman beyond giving her certain articles of clothing, finding occasional jobs for her, and buying bunches of violets from her *bambini;* but if these were not benefits deserving of such extravagant laudation, it was at least pleasant to hear that the sweet face and the kind heart of the donor were appreciated.

Somewhat less of charm attached to a prolonged narration of the good woman's personal history and misfortunes—how her husband had emigrated to South America two years before and had never been heard

of since ; how for a time she had supported herself by singing in the streets, but had been deprived of that means of earning a precarious livelihood by a cold which had settled on her chest and taken away her voice ; how she had been ill for six weeks, and had been unable to go into the hospital, because there was nobody with whom she could leave the children, and so forth.

By way of checking this tale of woe Lord Walter pointed to a bright-eyed, olive-complexioned lad of fourteen or fifteen, who was leaning, with folded arms, against the wall, and listening smilingly to the dialogue. "Is that your son?" he asked.

The woman sighed and shrugged her shoulders. "*Che vuole?* He ought to be working, but work is not so easy to come by, and there is no money to apprentice him to a trade. He does what he can, and he is willing to work, are you not, Beppino?"

"Possibly," said Walter, "I might be

able to give him a helping hand. I rather want a boy to sweep out my studio—for I am a sculptor, I should tell you. Yes, to sweep out the studio and—and run messages and—in short, to make himself generally useful. You might send him up to-morrow—and perhaps it would not be a bad plan to give him a good washing first—and of course I would have him decently clothed and fed. Then about wages: shall we say a *scudo* a week?"

The result of this conversation was that when Norma next visited Lord Walter's studio, the door was opened for her by a grinning youth with a very clean face and a very new suit of clothes.

"Beppo!" she exclaimed in amazement; "what in the world are you doing here?" And when she had heard Beppo's explanation of his improved circumstances, she was as much pleased as she was surprised. She knew that Lord Walter was not ungenerous in the matter of almsgiving; but she had never expected him to take much

personal trouble in order to assist his poor fellow-creatures, because she was aware that nine men out of ten will not do this. They have other matters to attend to; they have bought a yoke of oxen and therefore they cannot come. It is woman's mission to look after the details of benevolence. And so, on entering the studio, she shook hands with its tenant a good deal more warmly than usual.

"I have just seen Beppo," she said. "How very kind of you to provide for him like this!"

"I thought perhaps it would please you to know that his mother had one mouth less to feed," answered Walter rather injudiciously.

Norma's face fell a little. "Oh, I hope you had some better reason than that," she said.

This speech seemed to tickle Lady Spencer, who laughed for some time before she remarked, "I am not sorry for you, Walter; you shouldn't blurt out the truth so clumsily."

"But why am I clumsy? And why shouldn't I tell the truth?" asked Walter. "I dare say there are a thousand little boys in Rome who would be glad to have Beppo's place; but as I can't find employment for a thousand boys, I naturally chose one in whom I believe Miss Shafto to be interested. It seems to me that that was as good a reason as another."

"Well, so it was," agreed Norma, repenting of her ungraciousness. "Anyhow, it was a very kind thing to do, and I only hope Beppo won't bring discredit upon me."

Later in the day Lord Walter chanced to meet his aunt at the Embassy. "Well," said she, as he was escorting her downstairs to her carriage, "what conclusion is one to draw from your having saddled yourself with a brat who will probably steal all your silver spoons?"

"I haven't got any silver spoons," answered Lord Walter, laughing, "and you may draw any conclusion that you like."

"Thanks. You didn't allow me quite

as much liberty as that when these sittings began, if you remember. They are drawing near an end now, I suppose."

"I am afraid so," replied Lord Walter with a sigh.

"H'm! I don't want to be discouraging; but I can't congratulate you upon your success, so far. You may have caught the likeness, but you haven't captured the original yet, I can tell you. Very far from it!"

"Why do you say that?" he asked, not caring to disguise his anxiety.

Lady Spencer made a slight grimace. "I have eyes and ears. I fancy that she likes you rather better than she did at starting; but whether that is to be regarded as a good sign or not is another question. If I were in your place, I should be inclined to try the effect of a little wholesome neglect."

But Lord Walter felt no inclination at all to adopt that prescription.

CHAPTER XI.

UNWELCOME NEWS.

Norma was mistaken in supposing that absence from England had brought about any cessation of speculative activity on her father's part. What it had brought about was only a less direct personal supervision of his affairs; and deeply indebted did he feel to Baron Lämmergeier, who, in the midst of transactions of far greater magnitude, had kindly offered to look after his humble little ventures for him. Unfortunately they did not prosper, notwithstanding this skilful and experienced patronage. Post after post brought disastrous tidings to poor Mr. Shafto; and it was really heroic of him to conceal his worry and anxiety from his daughter,

whose enjoyment of her holiday he did not wish to spoil. It may be added that he shrank from confessing that he had been guilty of great imprudence; though to himself he frankly made that admission.

Indeed, there was no denying it. Lämmergeier, while writing very sympathetically to him upon the subject, had felt bound to tell him so, and had gone on to say, "I wish you had larger sums at your disposal. Had I a hundred, or even fifty thousand pounds of yours in my hands at the present time, I could place them for you in securities which would not, indeed, offer to return you fifty per cent., like some of those with which you have unluckily meddled, but which would give you safety, together with a rate of interest sufficient to render you, comparatively speaking, a rich man. But these, of course, are opportunities which seldom present themselves."

It made Mr. Shafto's mouth water to read about them. There was the loan

which Baron Lämmergeier was about to float for the government of the newly constituted principality of Macedonia. Consols could not be safer, the great man declared; yet such were the public ignorance and distrust that these poor Macedonians would be made to pay as much for their money as if they had been Chinese. Then there was the great Trans-African Railway Company. Wise indeed would those be who secured shares in that undertaking while shares were to be had at their present ridiculously low figure! Moreover (but this was a profound secret), Lämmergeier thought he saw his way to obtaining concessions of immense value from a certain Oriental potentate who was hard pressed for money, and who, being quite unaware of the hidden riches of his dominions, was not going to be enlightened by better informed persons. This seemed hard upon the potentate; but then he shouldn't have been so careless and extravagant.

Mr. Shafto, who had also been careless and extravagant, felt it very hard that he should be unable to profit by these dazzling suggestions. Profit by them he certainly could not, unless—— When he reached this point in his cogitations he generally broke off and tried to think about something else. He could not help feeling that it would be rather a shame to sell Brampton. Letting the house was nothing; anybody may be obliged to let his house. But to sever himself finally from the lands upon which his ancestors had lived for so many generations would be a terrible wrench—at any rate, it ought to be a terrible wrench. To be sure he was the last of his name, and Brampton would be something of a white elephant to Norma if she could not afford to live there. After this fashion Mr. Shafto took counsel with himself when letters came to him from his lawyers with enclosures from Sir Christopher Shearman, who was very anxious to buy the place, and very persistent about

it. He would not take "No" for an answer. His first offer having been rejected, he promptly made a slightly higher one, then a higher one yet; and as Mr. Shafto's lawyers intimated that the terms specified would not in any case have been such as to tempt their client, a process of bargaining insensibly began, of which it was not very difficult to predict the end.

It was after reading one of Lämmergeier's seductive letters that Mr. Shafto, yielding suddenly to temptation, wrote to his lawyers, instructing them to accept Sir Christopher's latest bid, which that gentleman had declared must be regarded as final. The old gentleman was a good deal agitated and ashamed of himself as soon as he had taken this step, but he said nothing to his daughter, thinking, "What is the use of distressing her until the deed is actually done? After all, it is for her sake that I am doing it, and perhaps she won't mind. It is very unlikely that we

should ever have been able to live at Brampton again."

It so chanced that the same post which brought him information of the virtual conclusion of his bargain brought Norma a long letter from Madge, in which no mention was made of the sale or purchase of Brampton, but which contained another piece of intelligence somewhat unwelcome to its recipient. Norma could not but think it a pity that Rome should have been chosen for the convalescent Sir Christopher to complete his recovery in; and it struck her that Madge was suspiciously eager to point out that this choice was her husband's, not her own.

"Except for seeing you," Madge wrote, "I don't particularly care about Rome myself. I would much rather have gone to Sicily, for instance. But when Christopher comes out with any scheme which one would wish to oppose, the only way to make him drop it like a hot coal is to hail it with delight. If you begin to object,

you are done for. So Rome it is to be—and I hope you won't be very sorry to hear it."

While Norma was knitting her brows over this somewhat disingenuous epistle, her father was casting timid and furtive glances at her. At length he cleared his voice and said, "You seem to have a very voluminous piece of correspondence there."

"It is from Madge Shearman," answered Norma, looking up. "They are coming here at once. She says Sir Christopher requires a change."

"Coming here, are they? That will be pleasant for you. She doesn't say anything about—about Brampton, does she?"

"Yes, there is a good deal about the poor people. She doesn't seem to have been seeing much of the neighbours, because of course Sir Christopher hasn't been in a state to receive visitors. Shall I read you that part of her letter?"

"No, thanks—no. That wasn't what I meant. I thought she might have men-

tioned—but perhaps her husband hasn't told her about it. It's as well not to worry one's women-folk with business transactions until they're completed, you know. At least, that's what I think; otherwise I should have spoken to you before this about something which I've had in my mind for a long time past. I know you won't like the idea of Brampton being sold, but——"

"Sold!" interrupted Norma in dismay. "Surely you are not thinking of selling, papa! It can't be necessary to sell, now that the place is let and Sir Christopher is paying a high rent for it."

Mr. Shafto made a gesture which was intended to signify that his patience could stand any test, but that such a remark as that was putting rather a severe strain upon it.

"Perhaps, my dear Norma," said he, in a mildly reproving tone, "you will do me the justice to admit that I should hardly take a step of this kind if it were un-

necessary. As for my thinking of it—well, of course I have thought of it very fully and anxiously, and now I have gone further than that."

"You don't mean that you have actually done it!"

"Yes; that is what I mean. Really, Norma, I don't see why you should look at me as if I had parted with my birthright for a mess of pottage. We don't live in patriarchal times; no special sanctity attaches to land, that I am aware of; and at least I may say for myself that I have made a good bargain. In fact, I couldn't have expected to receive anything like the price which Sir Christopher has given if he had not taken a fancy to the place. I suppose money is no object with him."

"Oh, it is Sir Christopher who has bought Brampton, then?"

"Yes; and a great piece of luck it is for me that there was a Sir Christopher handy! To find a purchaser for an estate isn't the easy matter now that it once was."

Norma was silent. She could not consider the discovery of a purchaser lucky in this instance, nor did she share her father's opinion that no special sanctity attached to the possession of land. It seemed to her that nothing short of necessity could excuse a man for cutting himself off from the property which his forefathers had handed down to him, and with which he was identified by a hundred ties and responsibilities. Mr. Shafto, to be sure, had pleaded necessity; but she found it rather difficult to accept the plea or to believe that the rent which Sir Christopher was paying did not represent as much income as could be derived from the purchase-money, should the latter be invested in safe securities. What seemed only too probable was that it would not be invested in safe securities. For these reasons she held her tongue, thereby provoking her father into remarking that it was rather hard upon a man who had done his best to put a brave face upon misfortune that

he should be met with black looks at home.

Well, at all events, there was no use in looking black, and Norma endeavoured to imitate the example of courage so modestly brought to her notice. "Of course I'm sorry," she said frankly; "but if the thing had to be done, I'm glad it's over, and I'm glad you didn't tell me anything about it before. It was very good of you to spare me all the worry and uncertainty that you must have been through."

This praise pleased Mr. Shafto, who really felt that he deserved it. "It's like going to the dentist's," said he; "the worst part of the business is the sitting in the waiting-room. Now our teeth are drawn; and as we've behaved pretty well and haven't cried over it, we are entitled to our little half-crowns. Here is yours."

So saying, he produced a morocco case which, on being opened, proved to contain one of those dull-gold necklaces, copied from Etruscan designs, for which the

Roman jewellers are celebrated. The loss of a perfectly sound tooth is perhaps hardly to be compensated for by a dole of half a crown, and it is certain that the receipt of this necklace was no great consolation to Norma. However, she thanked her father and kissed him, and sent him away quite contented and relieved.

Her reflections when she was left to herself were by no means so cheerful as his; nor was it only the thought that her old home would henceforth know her no more that saddened her. She was not so blind but that she could see what was likely to come of all this—what, at any rate, might come of it. She remembered Mrs. Lämmergeier's warning; she guessed that her father's motive for parting with Brampton was the need of ready money. Doubtless he had had losses which would probably be followed by further losses—the end was not hard to foretell. And she was perfectly helpless. Her father, she knew, would do a great deal to please her;

but he certainly would not give up trying to increase his fortune to please her. She might as well ask him to change his bootmaker or his political views. Upon such subjects as these, Mr. Shafto would have said, women cannot really have an opinion, because they lack the requisite knowledge upon which to ground one.

Norma sat idly for a long time in the sunny little sitting-room, thinking over the news which that morning had brought to her, and finding it more and more unsatisfactory the longer she thought about it. At last she remembered that she had promised to lunch with Lady Spencer, and went to her bedroom to change her dress.

Some days before this, Walter Sinclair had reluctantly admitted that the number of sittings which Miss Shafto had been kind enough to give him had been more than sufficient for his purpose, and that he could not trespass upon her time any longer. However, though these meetings

had come to an end, his aunt's good-nature had enabled him to arrange others without any difficulty, and Norma was not at all surprised to find him in Lady Spencer's drawing-room when she arrived there. She was also glad to see him; for she thought that, if she could get an opportunity of so doing, it would be as well to prepare him for the possibility of an encounter which he would naturally wish to avoid. That such an opportunity would be afforded to her in the course of the afternoon was speedily made manifest.

"I am going to drive you up to the Doria-Pamfili gardens after luncheon," Lady Spencer announced. "Walter is coming too, because he thinks he may be of use in helping you to gather anemones for me. Perhaps you will allow me to sit in the carriage and look at you. At my age, pottering about on damp grass and stooping down to pick wild-flowers is very apt to result in an attack of lumbago."

"One can't be too careful to avoid risks

of that kind," observed Lord Walter gravely. "Lumbago is a complaint which it is a great deal more easy to get than to get rid of."

"What do you know about it?" retorted his aunt. "Damp grass is not likely to give either you or Miss Shafto anything worse than a cold in the head for a good many years to come. At the same time, I should be sorry to be the cause of your catching cold, and if you think there is any danger in your getting out of the carriage, I am sure I shall be only too glad for you to remain in it with me."

However, when the gardens of the Doria-Pamfili Villa were reached, the grass was found to be as dry as a bone; and indeed if it had been soaking Lord Walter would hardly have been deterred by that circumstance from assisting Norma to fill her hand-basket with the anemones for which that locality has been famous from time immemorial. They wandered away to some little distance from the road, along

which Lady Spencer had herself slowly driven, and Norma at once took advantage of their privacy to say, "I heard to-day from Madge Shearman, who is coming here very soon. Sir Christopher requires a change, it seems. I don't know whether I ever mentioned to you that he had had a bad accident out hunting some time ago."

"You didn't mention it," answered Lord Walter, "but I saw a paragraph about it in the newspapers. He didn't break his neck, I think."

"Well, hardly: people don't travel about with broken necks. You speak as if you rather wished that he had."

"I? Oh no; he is welcome to have as many necks as the Hydra and to keep them all intact, so far as I am concerned. Only I suppose that if he had happened to break the one that he possesses nobody would have been inconsolable."

Norma made no immediate reply to a remark which seemed to her to be in rather bad taste; but after a time she

resumed: "Madge doesn't write as if she were anxious about her husband; but he must still be more or less of an invalid, I should think. Perhaps they will go further south before long."

"They will stay over Easter, you may be sure. Not that that will be much worth their while; but English people always think it a duty to see what they call 'the ceremonies.'"

"I suppose it really isn't much worth while," assented Norma somewhat eagerly. "Everybody says that Easter in Rome is quite a different thing from what it used to be. Shall *you* be here at that time, do you think?"

Lord Walter glanced at her and laughed. "For whose sake do you want me to go away, Miss Shafto?" he inquired. "I'll go if you like, though I'm rather busy just now, and it won't be very convenient to leave my work; but I should like to know your motive for wishing to banish me, if it isn't impertinent to ask?"

"To tell the truth," answered Norma, "I thought you yourself might wish to go. Rome is not such a very small place, though, and no doubt you will be able to avoid meeting Madge if you choose."

"But I don't wish to avoid her," he declared. "Why should I? I told you, you know, that I had recovered my sanity. You really need feel no anxiety on my account."

Norma would have given a good deal to be able to reply that she felt no anxiety on Madge's account, but that she could not do. Madge, of course, might have been changed and sobered by marriage; but that did not seem certain, and it was rather for Madge's sake than for Lord Walter's that she thought it desirable to keep these two persons apart.

"I dare say it doesn't much matter," she said rather coldly, at length. "I think that if I were in your place, I should feel it rather uncomfortable and awkward to have to renew my acquaintance with

Madge; but different people have different ways of looking at things."

"I don't look at it in that way, at all events," answered Walter. "I have no feeling about the matter except one of sincere thankfulness to Lady Shearman for having opened my eyes to my own lunacy."

"Do you know what I think?" said Norma abruptly. "I think that if you were so completely cured of what you call your lunacy as you profess to be, you would be less bitter against Madge."

He had in truth somewhat overshot the mark in his eagerness to convince her that his former love was extinct. It seemed to her that he must either be still smarting or singularly fickle; nor was she disposed to listen very patiently to his protestations that he cherished no bitter sentiments at all against Lady Shearman.

"Well," she cut these short by remarking, "I am glad to hear it; and I hope in future you won't hint that she would

have been pleased if her husband had broken his neck."

"I only said she probably wouldn't have been inconsolable. Do you really think that Sir Christopher's death would leave anybody inconsolable?"

"I think he has good qualities, and I know he has been good to the Brampton people. They are his own people now," added Norma a little sadly; "for he has bought the whole estate."

Thus another turn was given to the conversation, which was prolonged until Lady Spencer sent her footman to put an end to it.

CHAPTER XII.

LORD WALTER FORGETS HIS MANNERS.

Sir Christopher and Lady Shearman arrived at the Hôtel Bristol in a style befitting personages of their wealth, with a courier, a valet, a maid and a cart-load of luggage. Mr. Shafto, who happened to be looking out of the window when the carriage which had been sent to meet them stopped at the door, rushed downstairs to give them a hearty welcome; for it did not strike him that people who have just been released, weary and dirty, from prolonged confinement in a railway-carriage are seldom in the mood to appreciate being heartily welcomed. Norma, more discreet, contented herself with sending a message to the effect that she hoped Lady

Shearman, when she was rested, would come in and have a cup of tea with her.

About an hour later, Madge, arrayed in a very elaborate tea-gown, embraced her affectionately, exclaiming, "You dear old Norma! How funny it is to see you looking exactly the same as ever!"

"It would be still more funny if I were altered, wouldn't it?" said Norma, smiling. "Nothing has happened to alter me during the last few months. You don't look very much changed either, Madge."

"Do I not?" returned Madge, ensconcing herself in an armchair, tucking one leg under her, and swinging the other lazily. "Then all I can say is that appearances are deceptive. I'm an old married woman now—very old and very married. I don't suppose that since the world began there ever was anybody quite so much married as I am."

"That sounds satisfactory."

"You think so, do you? Well, perhaps it may; but I can assure you that it doesn't

feel satisfactory. Admitting that your husband was the most agreeable companion in the world—and I should think that was rather more than Christopher's dearest friends, if he has any, would claim for him—you would still like from time to time to be allowed to exchange a word or two with somebody else, wouldn't you? I mustn't exchange words with anybody—not even with my own mother."

"You are allowed to exchange words with me, it seems."

"Only upon sufferance. Christopher has a high opinion of you; he thinks your example and society may do me good. But he won't quite like it if I see even you every day. In this instance," continued Madge composedly, "I feel justified in saying that he may lump it. Because I am not going to be in the same house with you and go without seeing you every day. Oh, if you knew what a relief it is to look at your good old face and to feel that I may talk just as I please once more!"

If there was a living being whom Madge loved, it was Norma Shafto, and her pleasure at being reunited with that trusty friend was quite unfeigned. For the moment, she had forgotten all about Lord Walter Sinclair and her fear that Norma had supplanted her in his affections. She wanted to be sympathized with and petted, as of old; she wanted to have a good grumble at her husband; and in this she was permitted to indulge, with very few interruptions, for fully half an hour. Norma knew better than to remonstrate with her until she had had her breath out; and it must in fairness be confessed that she had something to grumble at.

"Of course, while he was ill, one was sorry for him and humoured him," Madge said; "but now that he is all right again, it does seem to me that my turn has come. Amusement of some sort or kind I must have, or perish, and if we go on as we have begun, no amusement of any kind will be obtainable at Brampton; for he

objects to my showing the smallest civility to any of the neighbours. By the way, I don't know whether I ought to condole with you or congratulate you upon our having come into possession of the place."

"Personally, I can't feel it to be a matter for congratulation," answered Norma. "As you may imagine, I didn't want Brampton to be sold."

"No; only if Mr. Shafto was determined to sell, as Christopher says he was, he was fortunate in being able to sell so soon, I suppose. As for me, I don't congratulate myself—though perhaps it is as good a place to be buried alive in as another. No tomb can be exactly a cheerful abode, can it?"

"I suspect that you will be away from home for at least half the year," said Norma. "You will be sure to go up to London for a part of the season, and then you will be in Scotland for the shooting, I suppose, and now, you see, you are in Rome."

"Yes; but whether I shall be permitted

to do as the Romans do is another question. By the way, how do the Romans amuse themselves during Lent? How have you been amusing yourselves? I don't call picture-galleries and churches and ruins places of amusement, you know. You do a little in the way of social intercourse, I presume."

"Well, not very much. Of course there aren't many entertainments just now, but we have a few friends whom we see pretty constantly. There is a Mr. Grey, belonging to the Embassy, whom I rather like, and Lady Spencer Sinclair, an aunt of Lord Walter's—and of course Lord Walter himself."

Norma thought it as well that this last name should not be rendered conspicuous by omission, and she was glad to notice that the sound of it produced no perceptible effect upon the emotions of Lady Shearman, who only remarked—

"Oh yes; he's here, to be sure! I should rather like to see him again. I

wonder whether Christopher could be persuaded to ask him to dinner?"

Nothing more was said about Lord Walter during the remainder of the interview; but at breakfast the next morning Madge remarked casually to her husband, who had expressed his intention of going out and looking up some of his acquaintances, "I wish you would look up Lord Walter Sinclair among the rest, and get him to come and dine some evening and meet the Shaftos. He is a great friend of theirs, you know."

"Is he?" returned Sir Christopher, not looking best pleased. "Then I suppose he can see them without dining with us. He's no great friend of mine, anyhow. Why are you so anxious to have him here?"

"I'm not in the least anxious," answered Madge indifferently; "I thought he would do to talk to Norma, that was all. But I dare say you can find somebody else."

Sir Christopher was as much in love with his wife as he had ever been. He always

wished and tried to gratify her, and if he very often tormented her, he quite as often reproached himself for it afterwards. So when he had been to the banker's, and had left a card at the Embassy, and had looked in at the club, to which he had been introduced as a visitor, it struck him that after all there was no reason why Lord Walter Sinclair should not be asked to dinner as much as any other young man. He therefore inquired the address of his intended guest, and shortly afterwards was shown by Beppo into the studio where Walter, who was hard at work, was not a little surprised to see him.

"Well, Sinclair," said Sir Christopher in a very friendly way, "how are you? My wife and I are in Rome for a short time, and, hearing that you were here, I thought I'd take the liberty of dropping in to say good morning."

Walter made a civil reply. The last time that he had seen his visitor had been at Mrs. Lacy's ball, when they had so

nearly come to an open quarrel over the lady who was now Lady Shearman. He thought of that episode and was faintly amused by the reminiscence. So much had happened since then, and Sir Christopher had so completely ceased to be a person worth quarrelling with.

Sir Christopher, at all events, did not now seem at all disposed to be quarrelsome. He sat down and talked about Rome and about the hunting in Stourshire, giving a full account of his accident: after which it occurred to him that, since he was in a studio, he ought to get up and take some notice of the owner's works. Thus he presently came to a standstill before the figure of Charity, with which he was greatly struck.

"Well," he exclaimed, "if ever I saw Miss Shafto in my life!—Is it really meant for a likeness of her?"

"After a fashion, it is," answered the sculptor. "The figure, of course, doesn't represent Miss Shafto; it represents Charity.

But Miss Shafto very kindly consented to give me a few sittings for the head."

"I see," said Sir Christopher. "Well, you couldn't have chosen a more appropriate model for your purpose. Miss Shafto is charity itself, as I've found out since I've been living at Brampton. I've done my best to keep up the different works that she started; I felt that it wouldn't be fair to let them drop, even though some of them were not quite so judicious as they might have been. But perhaps it's all the more creditable to her heart that she didn't allow herself to be very much swayed by her judgment. Of which," added Sir Christopher generously, "I must say that she has a good deal more than most women."

"She will be pleased at having your approval," observed Walter.

"Well, I don't know about that; but I dare say she'll be pleased to hear that I haven't sent some folks to the workhouse who ought to be there by rights. By the

by, my wife told me to say that she hoped you would come and dine with us to-morrow and meet the Shaftos."

Walter hesitated. He had been perfectly truthful in assuring Norma that he had no wish to avoid Lady Shearman; nevertheless he did not quite like the idea of accepting hospitality from Sir Christopher. Also he was aware that he would feel, and probably look, a little awkward if his first meeting with his former love should take place in Norma's presence. For these reasons he made up his mind to decline the invitation, but he did not make it up so quickly, nor was his excuse so intelligible, but that his disinclination to be entertained was quite apparent. This neither distressed nor offended Sir Christopher. He, for his part, had done what he had been requested to do: if Lord Walter didn't want to come to dinner, why, he might stay away and welcome.

"I told him you wished him to dine with us, and I mentioned that the Shaftos would

be there," said he, in giving an account of the interview subsequently to his wife, "but he mumbled out something about being afraid he couldn't manage it—evidently didn't think it good enough, in fact. So then I came away."

It is possible that Madge might have ascribed this reluctance to causes not unflattering to her vanity, and that she might therefore have pardoned it if Sir Christopher had not gone on to remark—

"All the same, I rather wonder at his refusing, under the circumstances; for, unless I'm very much mistaken, Miss Shafto has made a conquest of him. He had a full-length statue of her in his studio, for which she has been giving him sittings, he says."

"A full-length statue!" repeated Madge incredulously. "What in the world can she be going to do with it!"

"Oh, it isn't nominally a statue of her, though it's a likeness, and an uncommonly good one too. He calls it Charity."

"How idiotic!" exclaimed Madge.

"Why idiotic? Nobody can deny that Miss Shafto is charitable; and when you come to think of it, she *looks* charitable. It struck me as rather a happy inspiration."

"Did it indeed?" returned his wife, in a tone of ill-concealed vexation. "I should have called it a great liberty; and I wonder Mr. Shafto didn't think it so. I am very sure that you wouldn't have liked it if Lord Walter had asked me to sit to him and had exhibited me publicly afterwards as a partially draped embodiment of one of the virtues."

"That's another thing," answered Sir Christopher. "You are married, and Miss Shafto isn't. Besides, I don't see how you could have been made to fit the part."

Certainly Lady Shearman did not at that moment look like the embodiment of any virtue. Not only was she much put out by what she chose to consider as Lord Walter's deliberate rudeness, but she was

greatly vexed to hear of Norma's visits to his studio. Norma (so she reasoned) would never have compromised herself in that way unless she had been either engaged or about to become engaged to the man with whose name her own must inevitably be connected by the gossips; and surely it was both surprising and deplorable that Norma should have so little pride. In any case, the matter demanded investigation, and Madge determined to investigate it. This however was not so easily done; for she hesitated to question her friend directly, and Norma, though she did not avoid mentioning Lord Walter, volunteered very little information about him.

"Oh yes; I sat to him for his statue of Charity," she confessed, without any embarrassment. "I hope it will be a success, and I really think it will. He has been getting on very well lately: so much so that many good judges say he will be a great sculptor some day."

"Great or small," observed Madge, "I

shouldn't have thought that you would care to be advertised as his model."

"I don't think I mind much," answered Norma. "After all, very few people know me, and he is not likely to advertise the fact that I sat to him."

"He seems to tell people about it, anyhow. He told Christopher the other day."

"But I don't want him to make a secret of it," Norma declared. "If I were ashamed of it I shouldn't have done it."

All this was very tantalizing; and what increased Madge's irritation was that Lord Walter showed no eagerness to return Sir Christopher's call. Several days elapsed without his performing this act of ordinary civility, although one afternoon Madge happened to hear that he had actually been to the hotel to see the Shaftos.

"Lord Walter appears to have left his manners behind him in England," she could not resist saying to Norma. "When he was in the same house with us he might

have taken the trouble to ask whether we were at home, I think."

"He was rather in a hurry," answered Norma not over judiciously; "he only came in for a minute to say that his aunt expected me to dinner this evening. I believe we are to go and see the Coliseum by moonlight afterwards."

Madge was quite unable to hold out against the temptation which suggested itself to her. "I too will visit the Coliseum this evening," said she demurely. "It is a thing which ought certainly to be done; and I can imagine nothing more charming than roaming about the ruins with Christopher by moonlight. I presume that you will take Mr. Shafto with you to talk to Lord Walter's aunt."

"Papa talks of meeting us there," answered Norma, who perceived that Madge would not be dissuaded from her project; "he is not going to dine with Lady Spencer."

"Then he had better dine with us, and

we'll meet you at the entrance. That will do capitally."

Mr. Shafto expressed his entire satisfaction with this arrangement when it was made known to him. "I'm no very enthusiastic admirer of moonlight myself," he confided to Lady Shearman during dinner; "by my way of thinking, sunlight is infinitely more beautiful, besides being a great deal more wholesome. However, if this sort of thing has to be done, I'm glad to do it in pleasant company. I can assure you I didn't half like the idea of wandering about outside that lonely Coliseum all by myself until it suited the others to appear."

Madge had fully considered the question of whether she should be late or early at the place of meeting, and had finally decided upon being there in good time. For one thing, she was not at all sure that Lady Spencer would wait; added to which, she had mentally determined upon a distribution of forces which she thought would be

more easily carried out if she were first in the field.

Thus, when Lady Spencer's carriage drove up, Walter Sinclair, after exchanging greetings with Mr. Shafto and Sir Christopher and looking about in vain for Lady Shearman, was accosted somewhat suddenly by a little lady, wrapped up in costly furs, who stepped out of the deep shadow of the wall into the bright moonlight and said, "I suppose we may salute one another in the customary manner now, Lord Walter. When we parted, you declined to shake hands with me, I remember."

Now Walter, who had been prepared for this encounter, had likewise been prepared to relieve it of all awkwardness by a happy combination of civility and indifference; but he had not been at all prepared for such an allusion as that; so he took off his hat and held out his hand, and could think of no better rejoinder than, "Oh, how do you do, Lady Shearman? I didn't see you at first."

She had gained her object by depriving him of his presence of mind. Sir Christopher, as she had anticipated would be the case, had already attached himself to Norma and was moving slowly towards the arena; Mr. Shafto and Lady Spencer were following, and the success of her manœuvre seemed to be assured.

"Poor fellow!" she said, with a mocking side-glance at her companion; "this is hard upon you. But cheer up; you shall be released when you have satisfied my curiosity upon a few points. And first of all, I should rather like to know why you won't dine with an old friend or even leave a card for her at the door."

CHAPTER XIII.

A BAD QUARTER OF AN HOUR.

Lord Walter perceived that he was in for it. Madge evidently did not intend to ignore the past, and, that being so, it was doubtless as well that she should be made to understand by how wide a gulf it was separated from the present. Therefore, although he did not much enjoy the prospect of wasting a quarter of an hour upon her which he had proposed to employ more pleasantly, he resigned himself to his fate, and offered no objection when he noticed that his companion was moving in a direction opposite to that which had been taken by the rest of the party.

"I'm sorry I wasn't able to dine with you when you were so kind as to ask me,

Lady Shearman," said he, in reply to her question, "and I humbly apologize for having neglected to leave a card. The omission shall be repaired to-morrow. My only excuse is that I am very busy."

"That is an excellent excuse, and nothing could be more politely worded," observed Madge; "but, you see, it doesn't happen to be an answer. I didn't ask whether you were sorry that you were unable, etc., etc. I asked why you wouldn't dine with us."

"Well, if you insist upon absolute honesty, my reason for declining was partly that I didn't think you could be very anxious to see me."

"Although I despatched my husband to invite you? You must give me credit for a high idea of the duties of hospitality. However, that was only a part of your reason, it seems. May one venture to inquire what was the other part?"

"Really I'm afraid I can't state it without being rude."

"Pray don't let that deter you. You may be rude to me if you like; it won't be quite the first time."

"Then I will confess that I was not very anxious to see you. It sounds a brutal speech to make to a lady; but you would have it—and I dare say you will admit that there was some justification for my not being anxious to see you."

Madge, at all events, did not seem to be offended. She walked slowly on for some little distance before she said, "Does that mean that you still bear malice?"

"Not the least in the world; far from it," he replied, with somewhat unnecessary emphasis.

"Oh! Then I must say that I don't see where the justification comes in," Madge declared; and this time there was a decided ring of displeasure in her voice.

"It seems to me," returned Walter, "that this conversation is pretty good evidence of it. We might have met as ordinary acquaintances, making no refer-

ence to bygone—unpleasantnesses; but I doubted whether you would agree to that, and it was obvious that we couldn't meet comfortably upon any other terms. I am now more than ever convinced that I was wise to decline your invitation."

"'Bygone unpleasantnesses!'" repeated Madge. "So that is the way you look now at what I thought was a bygone friendship! I hoped it wasn't quite bygone either."

"It ended after a fashion which was distinctly unpleasant for me; but I will gladly withdraw the expression, if you dislike it. I only meant to say that if we couldn't meet without alluding to what is unquestionably bygone, it was better for us not to meet at all."

"Yet you say that you don't bear malice. You are a little incomprehensible, do you know."

They had now mounted to one of the higher tiers of the amphitheatre. The moonlight fell upon the opposite side of

the vast circle and illumined the figures of Mr. Shafto, Lady Spencer, Sir Christopher, and Norma; but they themselves were in deep shadow. Lord Walter sat down, with the air of one who is resolved to end a discussion.

"If you will kindly tell me how I can possibly make myself more comprehensible," said he, "I will endeavour to do so."

"Perhaps you can't," answered Madge; "perhaps I shall have to arrive at a comprehension of you without your help. What I am curious to discover is whether you have utterly and entirely changed in these few months, and, if so, why you have changed?"

Whatever might be thought of the taste of that remark, it had at least the merit of rendering all euphemisms and circumlocutions unnecessary.

"I certainly have changed," answered Walter without hesitation. "I admit it; and I am not in the least ashamed of it. If you ask me why I have changed, I

suppose I can only say that it is because I know now that I made a very great mistake a few months ago."

"Oh, that's of course. You thought I was an angel, and you found out that I was only a woman like other women. Perhaps that is scarcely a reason for shunning me as though I had the plague."

"Excuse me, I never thought that you were an angel. What I thought was that I was in love with you. Well, you are married to another man now, and you never cared for me; so I suppose you won't mind my saying that I was mistaken there."

"I don't mind your saying it a bit; but I doubt your having been mistaken as to the fact," answered Madge, with a short laugh.

"It is a question of definition. In one sense of the phrase I was, no doubt, in love with you; but even in that sense I ceased to be so very soon after a certain afternoon which you will remember. Now,

Lady Shearman, I have told you the honest truth, and I hope I have satisfied your curiosity. Don't you think that this is a very disagreeable sort of interview, and that we had better bring it to a close?"

"You can't accuse yourself of having neglected any means of making it disagreeable," replied Madge. She added, after a moment or two of silence, "I have brought it upon myself, so of course I have no right to complain; but I must say that if you were disappointed in me, I am quite as much disappointed in you."

"I don't see why you should be. Surely you can have no reason for wishing me to love you still."

"I don't wish anything of the sort. I wished to be friends with you, if you would have consented to it; but I am not sure that I wish even that any longer. I don't think your friendship can be worth much, or your love either, since you can transfer it so quickly and easily from one person to another."

Walter was prudent enough to let this accusation pass in silence. He could not well deny, nor was he desirous of admitting, that he had transferred his love from one person to another; and, upon the face of it, he certainly had been guilty of fickleness. All things considered, though he felt a little uncomfortable, and was conscious of having spoken rather too roughly and unequivocally, he was inclined to congratulate himself upon having at least come to a clear understanding with Madge. Probably she would give him a wide berth for the future, and that was in every way the best thing that could happen. Presently he said, "Hadn't we better be looking for the others?"

She assented by rising, without making any articulate reply; and they set out in search of their friends, who however had some time before this disappeared from view.

Norma was a good deal alarmed when she saw Madge manœuvre Lord Walter

away from the rest of the party. It was nothing more than she had expected, but it was alarming nevertheless; and she glanced rather nervously at her companion to see how he would take it. Happily, Sir Christopher's face exhibited no symptoms of inward perturbation. There was just this consolatory feature about Sir Christopher's malady, that he was seldom jealous of one individual in particular, and that his wife should have paired off with Lord Walter did not, for the moment, cause him any more anxiety than if she had selected Mr. Shafto as her escort. Moreover, he had dined well and was in good humour.

"It's a great piece of luck for us to have met you, Miss Shafto," said he. "At least, one can't exactly call it luck, I suppose, because we shouldn't have come to Rome if you hadn't been here; but I'm very glad that we've managed to arrange a meeting."

Norma said what the occasion appeared

to require, and Sir Christopher went on: "We're here nominally on my account, you know; but between you and me, that's only a pretext. I hate foreign parts, and I'd a great deal rather have gone up to London for a bit, when my hunting was knocked off, than come abroad. However, it amuses the wife to travel about—which is a point that one has to consider."

"I am sure you are quite right to consider it," Norma declared, perceiving that he expected some such reply.

"Well, yes; although I'm not certain—still, once in a way doesn't make a rule; and if we were to leave home and our friends there, I don't know anybody whom I'd rather see her associating with than you, Miss Shafto."

"Madge hasn't a great many friends near Brampton, I think," observed Norma.

"She knows everybody within ten or fifteen miles of us; and that means a fairish lot of people. Of course we don't have dinner-parties every night or balls

twice a week; but I don't call it a dull county, do you?"

"I never found it so; but then I'm not accustomed to gaiety, and I don't much care about it. Besides, I always had plenty to do."

"Exactly so; you made occupations for yourself. I don't know," added Sir Christopher somewhat ruefully, "why Madge can't make occupations for herself; but apparently she can't—and the consequence is that she finds Brampton rather slow. I dare say she has told you so?"

Norma thought it best to ignore that question. "Madge is not at all like me," she remarked; "her tastes are altogether different from mine."

"Then I wish you could make her more like you and get her to adopt some of your tastes," Sir Christopher declared emphatically.

"I have no doubt you do," answered Norma, laughing. "It would be very convenient for you if she liked the monotonous

kind of existence that satisfied me; because then you could amuse yourself all day long with hunting and shooting and feel no qualms of conscience."

"That is as much as to say that you consider me a selfish brute."

"I don't consider you a brute at all, and I dare say you are not more selfish than other people," answered Norma, who in truth was far more anxious to retain Sir Christopher's attention for the time being than to convict him of egotism; "only it seems a little funny that you should complain of Madge's selfishness."

Sir Christopher became grave. "I don't complain," said he; "I have nothing to complain of. All I say is that, for her own sake, I wish Madge could interest herself as you did in the people among whom she has to live."

"I don't at all wonder at your wishing it. And I shouldn't at all wonder if she wished that you could interest yourself in the people among whom she would like to

live. Madge is just as fond of society as you are of sport. Fortunately the London season comes at a time of year when there is no sport to be had in the country."

"I haven't refused to take her up to London for the season," returned Sir Christopher somewhat sullenly; "but I haven't promised to do it either, and I don't see my way to making any promise. 'Society' means a good deal more than two months of London, Miss Shafto. Women who say they are fond of society won't be satisfied to remain quietly at home for ten months out of the year."

That was probably true. Norma's own opinion was that a wife ought always to give way to her husband; but, not wishing to propound that view of conjugal relations to one who so evidently shared it, and suspecting that she had already said as much on Madge's behalf as it would be at all prudent to say, she shifted her ground.

"It will be a very good thing for the Brampton people if you really stay ten

months out of the year there," she remarked. "So many people spend their time and their money away from home nowadays. That is the one thing that consoles me a little for being homeless; I don't feel that we are robbing anybody by wandering about upon the Continent."

"Ah, yes—I suppose so. And Mr. Shafto intends to lead a wandering life now, does he?" said Sir Christopher abstractedly.

He was apt to become abstracted when anybody's affairs but his own were under discussion, and he did not hear much of what Norma told him about the probability that her father would settle in London. Moreover, his wife's prolonged absence was beginning at last to make him uneasy. "What in the world can Madge be about!" he exclaimed abruptly. "She can't have lost herself, can she?"

At this moment they were joined by Lady Spencer, who had had quite enough of Mr. Shafto, and who also thought that

her nephew ought to have had more than enough of Lady Shearman. "If we stand about here much longer," she said, "we shall take away a pleasant memory of our moonlight expedition in the shape of a fever. It seems to me that the time has come for us to reassemble our forces and go home. Have you seen anything of Walter?"

"Not very lately," answered Norma, who indeed had seen nothing of him since her arrival.

"Then," said Lady Spencer, "perhaps somebody will be good enough to give him a shout."

Somebody, in the person of Sir Christopher Shearman, promptly raised a bellow which might have been heard half a mile off, but which nevertheless met with no response. As a matter of fact, Lord Walter did hear it and at once hurried his companion towards the point whence it had proceeded; it was no fault of his that by the time he reached that point the

impatient Sir Christopher was seeking for him at the opposite extremity of the amphitheatre. Thus began a chase which, quite against the will of all who were concerned in it, proved a protracted one. To catch within a limited space a man who is trying to evade capture is a feat which can generally be accomplished, because the chances are that he will end by blundering into your arms; but two persons who, under the same conditions, are trying to catch one another are very apt to run round and round until one of them drops, and so it came to pass that Lord Walter and Sir Christopher had lost both their breath and their patience when at last they met. The latter, unfortunately, had lost his temper into the bargain.

"Confound it all!" he gasped, "this is beyond a joke! Didn't you hear me call to you?—you must have heard me! We've been looking for you all over the place. And what the deuce have you done with my wife?"

"I am sorry to have given you so much trouble," answered Walter; "we, too, have been looking for you everywhere. As for Lady Shearman, she has been sitting in her carriage for some time past. I took her there when she seemed to be getting tired."

"I don't believe a word of it!" returned Sir Christopher rudely. "I went out to see whether she was in the carriage not two minutes ago."

Lord Walter was one of those enviable persons who grow cool when they are angry. To be put to the utmost inconvenience and annoyance, and to be called a liar afterwards, is enough to make any man angry. Consequently he replied with studied politeness, "I think you must be making a little miscalculation as to time. If you had been to your carriage two minutes, or even ten minutes ago, you would have found Lady Shearman in it."

"Of course!—of course!" chimed in Mr. Shafto, who had hastened up, and who

perceived that a disagreeable scene could only be averted by the intervention of a judicious third person. "Shearman was getting anxious—and so were we all for that matter—and under such circumstances, you know, one loses count of time. Anyhow, we must not let Lady Shearman run the risk of catching a chill by sitting there any longer, eh?"

Lady Spencer concurred cordially. "For goodness' sake, let us all get to our respective homes as quickly as we can!" she exclaimed. "To-morrow morning we shall perhaps be in a fitter temper to decide who is to blame for the absurd way in which we have been scampering about after one another. All I know is that it wouldn't be safe for anybody to blame me just now."

But Sir Christopher had worked himself up into a passion, and did not mean to be silenced by any third person, judicious or otherwise. "There can't be much question as to who has been to blame," he growled.

"The whole thing was deliberately and—and impudently arranged beforehand. No gentleman——"

"Excuse me for interrupting you," said Lord Walter, "but really I think you had better stop there. You are making yourself supremely ridiculous, and you evidently don't know what you are saying. You can come and quarrel with me at my own house if you still feel inclined to do so after sleeping upon it; but we won't wrangle here, please."

Somewhat to the surprise of the bystanders, Sir Christopher turned tail. He hastened away towards the entrance, muttering under his breath, and presently the others followed him in silence and at a rather slower pace. They caught him up in time to hear the concluding words of the furious invective with which he had thought fit to assail his wife.

"I only hope you've enjoyed your evening!" he shouted, as he flung himself down in the carriage beside her. "Because

this will be the very last chance that you'll get of enjoying yourself in such a way—I don't mind telling you that much!" Then he called out an angry order to the coachman, and so was driven away, without having gone through the formality of saying good night to anybody.

"I am glad," observed Mr. Shafto mildly, "that there are four seats in your carriage, Lady Spencer. Our friend Shearman seems to have forgotten that he offered me a lift. He is sometimes a little—shall we say vehement?—in his ways of going on."

"He appears to me," returned Lady Spencer, who was herself slightly ruffled, "to combine all the worst characteristics of the bear, the monkey, and the mongrel. I sincerely hope that I shall never be asked to meet him again."

Lord Walter took advantage of a short interval, during which Mr. Shafto was helping Lady Spencer into her carriage and tucking her rugs round her, to whisper

to Norma, "I hope you don't think that I have been consulting my own inclinations to-night." And as she did not reply immediately he added, with a touch of impatience, "You can't think so. That really would be the last straw!"

"Oh, I don't think so," answered Norma; "it couldn't have been pleasant for you, of course. But it is very unfortunate. I should have thought you might have foreseen what was likely to happen; and I should have thought you might have prevented it."

He obtained no further opportunity of defending himself, and when he reached the seclusion of his dimly lighted studio his wrath against Madge was greater even than his wrath against the senseless Sir Christopher.

"I didn't foresee what was likely to happen," he soliloquized; "how on earth was I to foresee it? One doesn't calculate upon having to deal with raving lunatics. But she must have known what she was

about well enough; and, upon my word, I'm not sure that that amiable husband of hers was wrong in declaring that the whole thing was deliberately planned. She has made matters extremely uncomfortable for me, if that is any satisfaction to her. The only comfort is that, after this, she can hardly speak to me again."

CHAPTER XIV.

SIR CHRISTOPHER'S CONTRITION.

In considerately intimating to Sir Christopher Shearman that he would be found at home the next morning by anybody who might desire to quarrel with him, Walter had not imagined that his suggestion was at all likely to be acted upon, and indeed had very soon forgotten that he had ever made it. But he was reminded of having said something of the sort when, as he was smoking his matutinal pipe, Sir Christopher was ushered into his studio by Beppo, who announced the visitor in a characteristically Italian manner with the remark, "Here is that red one again."

By this description of a person with the pronunciation of whose name he felt quite

unable to grapple, Beppo had doubtless only intended to make a graceful allusion to the colouring of Sir Christopher's beard; but at the moment it applied with equal force to the whole of that gentleman's face, which was suffused with a rich crimson glow. And this, it presently appeared, was not the flush of anger, but the blush of shame. Sir Christopher had allowed the moon to go down upon his wrath, but the sun had risen upon his contrition, and he had come to say so.

"I owe you an apology, Sinclair," he began. "I'm afraid I insulted you last night, or went very near it—at any rate, I'm told that I did—and—and I hope you'll overlook any rude things that I may have said. To tell the truth, I can't remember what I did say."

Lord Walter did not like Sir Christopher, and would gladly have dispensed with excuses which it was impossible to accept otherwise than in a friendly spirit. Nevertheless, he could not help feeling a little

sorry for the unfortunate man, who obviously did not enjoy eating humble pie and who had brought out the above confession with a wry face; so he answered in as cordial a tone as he could command: "My dear sir, pray don't think any more about it. I'm only sorry that you should have taken the trouble to come here and apologize. I quite understood at the time that you had lost your temper and didn't mean exactly what you said."

"Well, yes, I lost my temper, no doubt," agreed Sir Christopher; "and I suppose no man ought ever to lose his temper—though it isn't an easy matter to keep it sometimes. I dare say you'll admit that I had some excuse for losing mine last night."

This Walter really could not admit; but, not wishing to appear ungracious, he said rather vaguely, "Oh, it doesn't matter."

"Not to you perhaps, but it matters a good deal to me. What is one to think when one's wife disappears like that with a fellow—I mean with another man, who

—who—well, I may have been mistaken, of course; and I don't deny that I put myself in the wrong; but——"

"You really were mistaken," interrupted Walter. "Lady Shearman didn't disappear intentionally. I did my best to find you, and during the greater part of the time I was searching alone, because Lady Shearman very soon got tired and went to her carriage."

Sir Christopher put on a somewhat embarrassed smile. It was evident that he wanted to believe this statement, and it was also evident that he had something to say which he found a difficulty in expressing. He fidgeted about the studio and made several attempts to speak, which died away in gasps and grunts; finally he came to a standstill, and, facing the other man, as his habit was, without looking at him, blurted out: "The fact of the matter is, Sinclair, that there was a time when I was rather afraid of you. I dare say you remember that ball at Mrs. Lacy's, for

instance. I give you my word that I had forgotten all about it until last night; but the whole thing came back to my mind then, and—and other circumstances as well. And my wife, who is very angry with me—naturally perhaps; I'm quite aware that I treated her brutally in behaving as I did—my wife absolutely refuses to answer a single question upon the subject."

Thus the true object of Sir Christopher's visit and apology became apparent. He had, no doubt, passed through a painful domestic scene; he had been vanquished; he had been tortured into the bargain; and he was now reduced to the dismal expedient of appealing to his supposed rival for the removal of his misgivings. Walter's respect for the man was not increased by this discovery; but then he had not had much respect for him before, and he thought that, for more reasons than one, it would be as well to relieve him by a frank narration of facts. Therefore he said—

"Perhaps Lady Shearman may have

thought that it wouldn't be quite fair upon me to tell you that I proposed to her last summer, and that she refused me; but I don't mind your knowing it, if it will make you feel more comfortable."

"Refused you, did she?" cried Sir Christopher eagerly.

"Without the smallest hesitation. And as I am being so candid, I'll go a step farther and confess that I'm very glad she did refuse me. I don't, of course, mean that as any disparagement of her; only I am convinced now that she and I could never have hit it off together."

"If you come to that," observed Sir Christopher gloomily, "it doesn't look as if she and I were likely to hit it off particularly well."

That was a question upon the consideration of which Walter was not at all desirous of entering.

"I merely mentioned it," said he, "because I thought it might help to set your mind at rest."

"Oh—well, thank you; it's very good of you, I'm sure, Sinclair, and I'm sincerely obliged to you for being so open with me. But women, you know, are nothing if not contradictory. If she thought you were glad that you had been refused, depend upon it she would set to work at once and try with all her might to bring you down on your knees again."

"I hope you are doing Lady Shearman an injustice," answered Walter, smiling; "but anyhow I can promise you that her efforts, if she thought it worth while to make any, wouldn't have the ghost of a chance of success."

"H'm! you're very sure of yourself," grunted Sir Christopher, who rather resented the implication that his wife's charms could be so easily resisted.

"Oh yes, I'm sure of myself; why shouldn't I be? No doubt you would be just as confident in the case of any other lady. Take Miss Shafto, for example. You won't deny that Miss Shafto is ex-

ceptionally beautiful and charming; but I don't suppose she could bring you down on your knees, could she?"

"There's no great fear that she'll try."

"Well," returned Walter, beginning to lose patience a little, "perhaps there isn't much fear that Lady Shearman will try to subjugate me either. I don't know what more I can say. The simple truth is that of all women living she is the last who could ever be dangerous to me in that way. After what I have told you, I should think you would be able to understand that much."

Meanwhile, the lady who was thus being spoken of in a way which it must be admitted that few ladies would altogether like, was indignantly complaining of her wrongs to Miss Shafto. No sooner had Sir Christopher left the hotel than Madge slipped downstairs, and, having ascertained that her friend was alone, burst into Norma's sitting-room with an air of outraged innocence, to which the traces

of recent tears upon her countenance lent additional pathos.

"Now, Norma," she exclaimed, "you will allow, I hope, that my life isn't a very pleasant one! Now you have seen what Christopher can be when he is put out, and you have seen how very little it takes to put him out. And the horrid part of it is that he doesn't seem to care who sees him or hears him. I thought I should have died of shame last night. As for Lady Spencer, I shall never dare to look her in the face again. I don't so much mind about you, because I know how you must have felt for me." And here Madge put her arms round her friend's neck, while her tears began to flow afresh.

But Norma had resolved to be very stern. "It seems to me, Madge," said she, "that you brought it all upon yourself."

Then it was pretty to see how Madge's eyes grew round with wonder, and with what a look of sorrowful reproach the corners of her mouth drooped.

"Oh, Norma!" she ejaculated.

"Yes," repeated the pitiless Norma, "I certainly think so; and though I wish Sir Christopher had not made things so disagreeable for us all, I can't say I am sorry that he made them disagreeable for you. Why did you deliberately do what was certain to vex him?"

Madge sank down upon a chair and folded her hands resignedly. "I thought," she observed in a low voice, "that I had one friend—just one—left in the world; but it seems that I was mistaken. After all, I am not much surprised, though I am sorry. I suppose it is my fault that the Coliseum hasn't been fitted with the electric light yet, and that consequently it is possible for people who are at one end of it to lose sight for a few minutes of people who are at the other. As a matter of fact, what I 'deliberately' did was to bolt off to the carriage the moment that I realized the probability of Christopher's vexation. But of course neither he nor you will give me credit for that."

"I don't blame you for having lost us," answered Norma; "but I do think it was very foolish and very needless to walk away with Lord Walter as you did. Sir Christopher may be more jealous than other men; but anybody might be excused for disliking a proceeding of that kind."

Madge laughed rather disagreeably. "I wonder," said she, "whether you would think me entitled to dislike your walking away with Christopher as you did; I wonder whether it ever occurs to you that what is sauce for the goose may be sauce for the gander. If it is such a very reprehensible thing to talk to Lord Walter for a short time while somebody else is talking to my husband, what must it be to spend hours and hours in his studio and to act as an unpaid model for him! It would be useless for me to try and convince you that I am not a flirt; but at least I have the small merit of not being a humbug."

It was perhaps as well that, before Norma could make any reply, Mr. Grey's

card was brought in, and was speedily followed by Mr. Grey himself; for assuredly these two ladies had never been nearer quarrelling than they were then. As it was, they composed their countenances, while the sight of a smart-looking young man caused one of them to forget her wrath at once.

Mr. Grey had come to say that the Marchesa Somebody had given him her box at the opera for that evening and to beg Mr. and Miss Shafto to accept places in it. "I don't know much about music myself," he confessed, "but I believe the *Barbiere* is considered to be rather good. By Verdi or one of those Johnnies, isn't it?"

"If that is all you know about it," answered Norma, laughing, "I shouldn't advise you to go. The music of the Johnny who wrote the opera probably wouldn't please you."

"Oh, I tell you frankly that I shouldn't think of going for the pleasure of hearing

the music; but I would go a very long way for the pleasure of having your company, Miss Shafto." And Mr. Grey followed up this flattering assurance with one of those glances which he had on many occasions found to be effective.

To aim at one bird and bring down another is an accident which may happen to the best of shots; and under such circumstances experienced sportsmen accept the gift of heaven without losing their presence of mind. Mr. Grey had plenty of experience. When, therefore, his eyes somehow failed to encounter Miss Shafto's, but met those of a very pretty little woman, who smiled slightly, he showed himself equal to the occasion. He had just been introduced to Lady Shearman, and he now thought it would be quite pleasant to become better acquainted with her.

"I wonder whether you would care to come?" he hazarded. "It's a huge box; so that if there's anybody else—I mean, if you're not alone here——"

"I have a husband," said Madge demurely. "I'm afraid he wouldn't consent to my going anywhere without him."

"Oh!" answered Mr. Grey, who seemed to think that this was rather a pity. "Well, then, by all means bring him. And you and your father will come, won't you, Miss Shafto?"

Norma assented, not unwillingly. She may have thought that, since it was poor Sir Christopher's manifest destiny to be always jealous of somebody, Mr. Grey would be a rather safer person for him to be jealous of than Walter Sinclair.

And indeed there can be no doubt that if Sir Christopher had seen and heard what took place in the next quarter of an hour he would have been an angry man. For Lady Shearman and Mr. Grey got on so well together and with such remarkable rapidity that in a very few minutes they were upon the footing of old friends. Indeed, they both said that they felt like old friends,

because it turned out that they had a certain number of common acquaintances. And then Lady Shearman was graciously pleased to admire the very artistic little arrangement of Parma violets and lilies of the valley which Mr. Grey wore in his button-hole, and was further graciously pleased to accept it when he offered it to her; after which there was a lively interchange of words and looks, by which probably neither of them meant any harm at all. It was their nature to behave like that, and they couldn't express themselves in any other fashion. Such, at least, was Norma's charitable verdict upon them. At the same time, she could not quite approve of the remarks which Madge thought fit to utter after the young diplomatist's departure.

"When Mr. Grey entered this room," observed that vivacious lady triumphantly, "he was an admirer of yours, my dear; I flatter myself that he left it as an admirer of mine. It takes some skill to bring about

these rapid transformations, though I say it as shouldn't."

She had completely recovered both her temper and her spirits. "Did I say anything disagreeable to you just now, my dear old Norma?" she asked. "You said some very disagreeable things to me, I know. But never mind, I'll forgive and forget."

Norma gladly accepted these handsome conditions of peace, but avoided responding in similar terms. She could not, and did not, forget Madge's accusation. It troubled her throughout the remainder of the day, and she had not got rid of it in the evening when she and her father repaired to the theatre, where Mr. Grey was waiting to receive them, and where they were soon joined by the Shearmans. Had it been an utterly unfounded accusation she could have dismissed it from her mind without so much difficulty; but the unfortunate truth was that she had given grounds for it. She had spent a great many hours in Lord

Walter's studio; she had acted as his model; and if she had never dreamt of flirting with him, that was a fact of which no one but herself could be expected to feel convinced. She could only resolve to see as little as possible of Lord Walter for the future.

In the mean time Sir Christopher, who had stationed himself behind her elbow, was repeating to her much the same apology that he had offered to Lord Walter earlier in the day. This time, however, it was couched in even more humble terms; and indeed there could be no question but that the poor man was very much ashamed of himself. He seemed anxious to beg everybody's pardon all round; he would not drop the subject, although both Mr. Shafto and Norma politely gave him to understand that they had heard more than enough of it; and the abject deference with which he addressed his wife (who ignored him absolutely) was most pathetic.

It was not until after the second act that

the impossibility of expelling nature with a pitchfork was exemplified. By that time Sir Christopher had discovered that Madge and Mr. Grey had a great deal to say to one another, and that they were saying it in a whisper—which was abominable. He frowned, he fidgeted, he attempted to strike into their conversation and was ignominiously repulsed. Then he had a brief struggle with himself; and then, as was inevitable, the weaker side of him yielded to the stronger. However, he made no scene. All he did was to mutter some bad words, which nobody but Norma heard, to stuff his hands deep into his pockets, and to march out of the box. He was absent for the best part of half an hour; and when he returned it was only too evident to his neighbour that he had spent that half-hour in refreshing himself. His eyes were bright, his cheeks were flushed; there was a perceptible thickness in his utterance as he said to her defiantly—

"Well, Miss Shafto, I have to thank you

for giving me another pleasant evening. Jolly place, Rome—I shall always keep an agreeable recollection of it."

"If you go on like this you will spoil all my recollections of it," answered Norma desperately. "Don't you see," she added —for it seemed to her best not to affect any misunderstanding of his change of humour—"that you drive Madge to provoke you by your unreasonableness? You are furious with her now because you think she is flirting with Mr. Grey; but——"

"Think!—there isn't much room for thinking about it. Come, Miss Shafto, don't you *know* that she is flirting with him?"

"No, I don't know it; but if she is, that may be only because, as I say, you drive her to provoke you. You yourself admit that you were unjust to her last night."

"Very well," returned Sir Christopher, with a short laugh; "then I'm not unjust to her to-night—so we're quits. Oh, you needn't be alarmed; I shan't make a fool of

myself again. But one thing I can promise you, and that is that she shan't make a fool of me."

It was upon this emphatic declaration that the curtain fell, and if, as appeared probable, a domestic drama succeeded that which had been enacted upon the stage, Norma was not privileged to witness it. The Shearmans went away at once, and Mr. Grey, to whom it may have occurred that he had been devoting himself somewhat too exclusively to one of his guests, was very attentive in helping Norma on with her wraps and conducting her to her carriage.

"Your friend, Lady Shearman," he remarked airily, "is a nice, chatty little woman; but she seems to be afflicted with a terrible husband. Am I wronging him, or didn't he smell rather strong of bad brandy towards the end of the evening?"

Norma made no reply; but Mr. Shafto burst out laughing. "Shearman is a Bluebeard," he explained. "A very good

fellow; only you mustn't be civil to his wife unless you want to have the house pulled down about your ears. Don't do it again, my dear Grey; I wanted to warn you before, only I couldn't get a chance. If you had seen him last night at the Coliseum!—however, it isn't fair to tell tales. But it isn't fair to make a man drown his sorrows in bad brandy either—remember that."

CHAPTER XV.

MADGE MEDITATES VENGEANCE.

Sir Christopher, on leaving the theatre, lighted a cigar, threw himself down in the carriage beside his wife and maintained an unbroken silence as they clattered through the deserted streets. Madge, for her part, did not address a word to him. She had sent him to Coventry as a punishment for his conduct on the previous evening and intended to keep him there for some time to come. She flattered herself that she had at last found out how to manage this savage and was resolved that she would not again fall into the mistake of forgiving him too readily. Repentance is all very well, but before it can be proved genuine and accepted as such, it must be

evidenced by amendment. Sir Christopher, she thought, should now have ample opportunity of showing whether he proposed to amend his ways or not. And, as a little wholesome discipline to begin with, her encouragement of the attentions of Mr. Grey would doubtless prove to have been useful. She had not failed to notice Sir Christopher's abrupt exit, and the anxious looks with which Norma had greeted him on his return; she understood perfectly well that he had with difficulty restrained himself from treating the company to another exhibition of fury; and it was her opinion that if he were made to restrain himself in this way pretty constantly, self-restraint might become a second nature to him. Then perhaps he might prove endurable as a lifelong companion.

As for herself, she had greatly enjoyed her evening. Like Mr. Grey, she did not know very much about music, but fully appreciated the charms of congenial society; and if there was one thing more than

another that she loved, it was to be addressed in that language of unmeaning compliment which young men of the type of Mr. Grey are persuaded (and possibly they are not so very far wrong) that all women love. Happy are those who can combine the fulfilment of a high mission with personal gratification! Madge saw her way to having a good deal of fun while doing her husband the service of radically reforming him; consequently she reached the Hôtel Bristol in a contented frame of mind, little suspecting what a sad surprise and disappointment awaited her.

In the obscurity of the carriage her husband's features had, of course, not been visible, and she had taken it for granted that they still wore the hangdog and crestfallen expression which had characterized them throughout the day; but, lo and behold! the face of Sir Christopher, when illumined by the light of a moderator lamp, was no longer that of a whipped hound, but that of a stern and incensed master.

Under the circumstances, a strategic movement of retreat seemed advisable. However, there is no retreating through a door against which a thickset man has placed his back, and Madge had to give up her rapidly formed design of locking herself into her bedroom.

"Not so fast, if you please," said Sir Christopher grimly. "Be so good as to sit down for a few minutes. You and I are going to come to a clear understanding this time, my lady."

"I thought we had done so," returned Madge coldly. "You made me clearly understand last night that you were scarcely to be treated as a responsible being, and when you apologized this morning I clearly understood that your apology was worth nothing. I am too tired to go through it all again."

"That's a pity," remarked Sir Christopher, "because you've got to go through it again—or something like it. I apologized to you this morning because I lost my

temper last night and behaved rudely to you and your friends. That's all right: I don't want to retract a word of my apology, and I know now that I was unjust as well as uncivil. But it don't follow because I was wrong once that I'm to be wrong always; and what I have to tell you now, once for all, is that I won't have you going on as you did at the theatre this evening with that man Grey."

Madge made a disdainful grimace. "Now that you have relieved your feelings," said she, "perhaps you will allow me to pass. I don't choose to answer you."

"I haven't asked you any questions that I know of," returned Sir Christopher, without stirring. "But I'll ask you one now, and I expect you'll reply. Has it ever struck you that these men whom you take for admirers of your beauty laugh at you behind your back?"

Madge would have given a good deal to be able to falsify Sir Christopher's prediction by holding her tongue; but the painful

suspicion which his words suggested was too much for her. "No," she answered, "I can't say that it has. I am afraid it is very likely indeed that they may laugh at you, though."

"Luckily, I don't care two straws whether they laugh at me or not. But I care more for your reputation than you do; and that's why I tell you that I mean to put a stop to one of your little ways of amusing yourself. I grant you that it hurts me to see you flirting with other men, and you may make the most of that admission, but you are very much mistaken if you fancy that they enjoy being flirted with against their will."

"To begin with, I haven't flirted with anybody," Madge declared, becoming angry. "As for whether the men of whom you are so absurdly jealous enjoy talking to me, I confess that I am vain enough to think they do."

"You are, eh? I thought you were. Well, I don't know much about Mr. Grey,

but I can answer for it that Sinclair doesn't enjoy talking to you."

This was just what Madge had been afraid that she was going to hear. "You have actually been to see him, then?" she exclaimed. "How undignified, and how ridiculous! Did you go to challenge him to mortal combat?"

"No," answered Sir Christopher, "I didn't. I went to beg his pardon, because I thought I had spoken unjustifiably to him the night before. And he took that opportunity of informing me that it was anything but a pleasure to him to be monopolized by you."

Madge was deeply mortified. "If he did say so," she returned rather unadvisedly, "and if he was telling the truth, his taste has very much changed of late."

"So I understood from him. He told me that he had once offered to marry you and that you had rejected him. Also that he was now sincerely glad to have been rejected."

"He cannot possibly be more glad than I am. A man who would say such a thing as that—— However, it is nothing to me what he says. To-morrow morning, I suppose, you'll call upon Mr. Grey and ask him whether he would have married me if I had been free."

"No, I shan't take that trouble; you won't see very much more of Mr. Grey, I expect. But you may see just as much as you like, or as much as he'll let you, of Sinclair. If you get a nasty snub from him for your pains, you'll only have yourself to thank. I've warned you."

Madge, when she was very angry, could never help crying. She began to cry now; and Sir Christopher, who had hitherto had all the best of the encounter, at once struck his colours before the tears of the woman whom he loved and bullied. As his custom was, he heaped injurious epithets upon himself and implored her to forgive his cruelty; but she was far too much enraged to listen to him.

"Let me go!" she sobbed. "All I ask of you is to get out of my sight. I wish I had never seen you at all! And I wish —oh, how I wish!—that I was never going to see you again!"

So, after a few minutes, she effected her escape, and Sir Christopher gloomily rang the bell for whisky.

The next morning Madge breakfasted in solitude, her husband having gone out at an early hour and having left a message to the effect that he would probably not be back before dinner-time. Whither he had betaken himself and his sorrows she neither knew nor cared; he was out of the way at all events, and that was the main thing. Possibly his temper, which he lost and recovered with such rapidity, might take a turn for the better during those hours of absence. For her own part, though she was still very angry, there was some one with whom she was a great deal more displeased than she was with Sir Christopher, and if she could only have seen her

way to pay Walter Sinclair out for the humiliation which he had so wantonly inflicted upon her, it is certain that he would have met with scant mercy at her hands.

While she was revolving chaotic schemes of vengeance in her mind (which was not a very clear or powerful one), the post came in, bringing her a few letters. The last of these which she chanced to peruse proved to be the most interesting. It had a deep black border, it was written in a careful round hand, and ran as follows :—

"Shafto Arms, Brampton,
"3rd April.

"My Lady,

"I have the regret to inform you that my niece Elizabeth Walter succumbed on Tuesday last to decease of both lungs which Event, though long foreseen, have truly grieved her Aunt and Myself. I take this Liberty for to write to you My Lady because of your great Kindness and condescension to my niece and she wish

me to thank you for all you done for her. Likewise I was to say as what she told you was *best go no further* in her opinion, but your Ladyship was to please do what you think fit. Has for me My Lady I have never ask no questions nor yet felt no *curiosity*, being sure as a respectable girl would not have disgraced her Family, and about the money as she left I understand from the Lawyers that there will be no trouble, therefore I say to my Wife if the Gentleman was married under a name which was not his own what matter so long as the marriage was Legal? And I would umbly beg of your Ladyship to let the matter rest, which no good is done by stirring up gossip and the name of Walter will be engraved as soon as possible upon a very andsome Headstone.

"Asking pardon for the Liberty of writing and hoping as Sir Christopher have now quite recover his Health, I am

"Your Ladyship's obedient servant,

"JOSEPH GREEN."

So there was an end of Elizabeth, Marchioness of Loddondale; and the handsome headstone that was to mark her grave would bear no coronet — unless indeed the widower should think proper so to embellish it. It did not seem likely that he would do that, and probably the prudent Mr. Green was right in suggesting that no tardy revelations should be made as to the identity of the so-called Mrs. Walter. Nevertheless, Madge had already begun to realize confusedly that she held a weapon which might be turned to account, not indeed against Lord Loddondale, but against another and a greater offender. It was only in a confused way that she admitted this thought, because she was a little bit frightened of it and disinclined to face it. However, after a time she took it out into the open air with her, and, strolling up to the Pincian, seated herself upon a stone bench, with her head in the shade and her feet in the sun, gazing at the glittering city beneath her, and smiling

upon the nurses and children who passed and repassed. She was not a bad sort of woman; certainly she was not a cruel one. In common with the generality of mortals, she liked her friends pretty well and did not object to be avenged upon her enemies and had a far stronger affection for herself than for all the rest of the world put together. As for committing anything in the nature of a crime, she would have shrunk back appalled from the bare idea. At the same time, she wanted to make Norma Shafto think that Lord Walter had been clandestinely married and had deserted his wife; and by some means or other she had to convince herself that such a course of action was justifiable.

This was less difficult than may at first sight appear, because of course she did not put the case before herself in that crude way. To arrive at the conclusion that Lord Walter had a bad heart was simple enough: we all think that those who treat us with contempt have bad hearts. That

point being established, it naturally followed that any one who could prevent Norma Shafto from marrying this heartless man would do her a great service. But here Lady Shearman's conscience intervened and became troublesome. It was not much of a conscience; for, although it reminded her that to tell lies is wicked, it was unable to persuade her of the wickedness of pious frauds.

"I shall be careful to say nothing but the strict truth, if I speak to Norma upon the subject at all," Madge wound up the debate by declaring virtuously. "But I am not certain that I shall speak to her about it at all."

She was still uncertain when she rose, and, leaving the gardens, dawdled down the Via Sistina on her way towards home. There was a certain amount of risk in what she proposed to do, and it seemed a pity to incur it needlessly. Norma might possibly refuse Lord Walter: possibly, too, he might never ask her to be his wife. In

any case, there would be no harm in waiting a while. Musing thus, she passed before the door of the house which, as she knew, was inhabited by the man with the bad heart; and it so chanced that while she was pensively contemplating that door, it was suddenly thrown open by a black-eyed youth, who, when he noticed that he had attracted the attention of an English lady, touched his cap and said politely, "Buon giorno, Signora."

Madge's Italian was of an elementary description; but for the purpose of asking a few simple questions, and making a few simple statements, it served her well enough. She ascertained from the boy that he was Lord Walter's servant; also that his name was Beppo; furthermore that he was on his way to the Hôtel Bristol with a note for Miss Shafto. In return she informed him that she was a friend both of Lord Walter and of the lady to whom the note was addressed,

thereby eliciting a panegyric upon Norma which was quite a model of unstudied eloquence.

Now, Madge had a sincere love and admiration for her friend, and that Norma should be described as a saint and an angel from heaven would not, under ordinary circumstances, have seemed to her so very hyperbolical; but she was still smarting under a recent rebuke administered to her, and that made her a shade less willing than usual to listen to a recital of Miss Shafto's acts of benevolence.

"Was it Miss Shafto who got you your situation as servant to Lord Walter Sinclair?" she inquired.

Beppo grinned. "Eh! not precisely. Milordo engaged me, without asking any questions, one day when he stopped to speak to the mother in the street. He is very good, milordo; but one must tell the truth. I think he only did it to give pleasure to the Signorina." And Beppo,

as he made this observation, looked extremely knowing.

Madge questioned him a little further, and found him as communicative as could be desired. Oh yes; there would be a wedding before the summer. It was what everybody expected and hoped for. Milordo had executed a magnificent statue of the Signorina, and she had been many times—a great many times—to the studio. She had always been accompanied by his aunt, a very great lady and enormously rich. No doubt it was all arranged and approved of by the families. Was it true that in England the family had nothing to say to alliances, and that nobles married as they pleased, just like common people?

"No," answered Madge gravely; "that is only partly true. In England a nobleman generally marries to please himself; but his wife generally marries him to please her family."

Beppo, after reflecting for a moment,

was of opinion that Miss Shafto would not be influenced in that way. He was much interested and puzzled on being informed that Lord Walter, though the son of a marquis, was not a nobleman, and did not understand how that could be, in spite of the long explanation with which he was favoured.

The truth was that Madge only detained him because she could not make up her mind whether she should or should not yield to a strong temptation which had taken possession of her. It was a temptation of a very ignoble kind, and she did well to be ashamed of it. Besides, even if she could part with her self-respect so far as to intercept Lord Walter's note, what would be the good? It was very unlikely that it contained an offer of marriage.

Nevertheless, the sight of the closed envelope irritated her nerves: she wanted to have the first word. Finally, she decided upon a compromise.

"I am staying at the Hôtel Bristol," she said to Beppo. "If you like, I will do your commission for you."

But Beppo, with many thanks, declined this kind offer. He could not think of putting the Signorina to so much trouble. Moreover, what had he to do? It was the easiest place in the world. There was the studio to be swept in the morning, and there were a few visitors to be admitted in the course of the day, and after that nothing at all! It was enough to make one ashamed of taking one's wages. The end of it was that he accompanied her as far as the door of the hotel and then delivered up the note to her.

Well, it was certain that, after that, it must be taken to its destination. If Norma failed to receive it, inquiries would be made and detection would follow as a matter of course. Upon thinking it over, Madge was sure that she had never really meant to destroy a note addressed to another person, still less that she had con-

templated perusing it. But for all that, she took it up to her sitting-room with her, and remained a long time gazing at it before she rang the bell to inquire whether Miss Shafto was at home.

END OF VOL. II.

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